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Asimov's SF, July 2007

by Dell Magazine Authors

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Asimov's Science Fiction

July 2007

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business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write “manuscript guidelines” in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is Asimov's Science Fiction, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

EDITORIAL: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

by Sheila Williams

Your first impression of *Asimov's* is usually the cover. Although this image often represents an individual story, it must also convey a sense of the entire reading experience that lies ahead. At the newsstand, the cover art must attract the attention of a new buyer, maintain the interest of a familiar reader, and help convince both to take the magazine home. Lying in a stack of mail at home, this same cover vies for attention with the time you might carve out to play *World of Warcraft* or to watch the latest episode of *Desperate Housewives*. We place our trust in an illustrator's talent when we assign a story to him or pick up one of her pieces for reprint. Luckily, the vivid images that science fiction and fantasy engender attract a great many gifted artists to our field. As part of our thirtieth anniversary celebration, I'd like to mention some of the artists who've been a part of our magazine. We've worked with many gifted artists, but this column only gives me the space to mention a few of the illustrators you've recognized with your annual readers' awards.

The arrival of a new cover in the office creates a buzz. It is one of the last pieces to fall into place. As I write this editorial, I eagerly await July's cover proofs. I've seen Donato Giancola's striking painting, online, but it will be a few days more before I'll know how it looks with cover lines and the magazine's logo. I've always loved Donato's covers, and the public seems quite taken with his work, too. Donato won the Best Artist 2006 Hugo Award. The art for his September 2005 cover, which featured astronauts working in space, went on to win a major Spectrum Award and his gleaming robot on the August 2004 cover won that year's Readers' Award. Donato was delighted to add your award to his collection. For his acceptance speech, he wrote, “This is one of my favorite paintings, as well. My thanks go out to all the people who have encouraged and

supported my work over the years. It is recognition through awards like this that remind me, as I work in the studio, that I am on the right path; others are looking over my shoulder, as eager as I am to see what springs forth from the drafting table. May I continue to delight and entertain you for many more issues to come.” Naturally, we hope he does, too.

The highly regarded Michael Whelan is another artist we've had the honor of working with. Michael has won sixteen Hugo Awards. In 1990, our July issue, which featured his brooding megaliths on a beach, and the reprint of his intricate Snow Queen in December brought him his first *Asimov's Readers' Award*. His January 2005 image of a woman standing on a precipice brought him another. In November 1992, he graced our special tribute cover with a dignified depiction of Isaac Asimov on a pedestal of books next to a robot holding an eternal flame.

In correspondence about his most recent Readers' Award, Michael wrote, “Thanks for the email with the great news! It's particularly enjoyable for me to win for a painting I did for myself, based on a theme of my own. After illustrating books for over thirty years I have [since 1988, when the award winner was painted] been devoting more time to my gallery. Perhaps there will be other more recent pieces that might work as well.” Happily, two of those pieces have appeared on subsequent issues, and a painting Michael created for another venue graces our thirtieth anniversary anthology, as well.

A perennially popular illustrator, six-time Readers' Award winner, and multiple Hugo-Award recipient is Bob Eggleton. Bob's most recent *Asimov's* cover was April/May 2006's amusing and evocative portrayal of the ill-fated Gernsbach expedition. When I told him about this editorial, the artist responded “I think what's great about *Asimov's* is that it's widely read and goes to subscribers, which means that each and every month people see a piece of artwork on the cover that hopefully promises amazing adventures within. It's always nice to hear that readers chose some of my artwork to award ‘best cover art.’ It means that my work is meaningful to people and gives them enjoyment. That's really the mission of any artist. Even when it doesn't win an award, though, I hope readers enjoy my work along with the whole magazine. The field—the magazines—have changed and evolved so much over the years. It's fun to be part of that evolution.”

It's true that *Asimov's* covers have changed over the years. Although I vividly recall the soft blues and purples from the palette of our 1989 Readers' Award winner Hisaki Yasuda, whose dolphins and whales seemed to leap right off the page, and the surreal floating images of Wojtek Siudmak (winner, 1997), we've long since lost touch with both artists. Gary Freeman, who tied with Bob Eggleton in 1992 for the Readers' Award, is another artist I haven't heard from in years. I associate Gary's work with robots because so many of his covers accompanied Isaac Asimov's stories. The image of Keith Parkinson's (winner, 1990) dragons remains with me, but, sadly, the artist passed away in 2005.

Fortunately, we remain in touch with many of our more recent award winners. Michael Carroll, who won the award in 2002, has been responsible for intriguing astronomicals, ancient dinosaurs, and fiction. His story, "The Terrible Lizards of Luna," appeared in our June 2000 issue. Multiple Hugo-Award winner, Jim Burns, is also a two-time winner of our Readers' Award (2000 and 2004). His wide-ranging talent brilliantly conveys both the deadly chill of frozen Mars in a Kim Stanley Robinson story and the vast reach of space in a Charles Stross tale. News has just reached us that Jim will illustrate our August cover story, "Horminga Canyon," by Rudy Rucker and Bruce Sterling. Our 2003 winner, Dominic Harman, is another versatile artist who seems equally at home with aliens, space stations, and planetary vistas.

New artists come to our attention and we rediscover old favorites. Alas, there isn't room here to discuss all the creative people who worked on *Asimov's* covers before the award existed, or the lovely work by many artists who haven't managed to snatch the Readers' Award. For the past thirty years, the look of *Asimov's* has been defined by these imaginative people. We can't wait to see what surprises will spring from their drafting boards in the years ahead.

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REFLECTIONS: LIMBO ON THE MOON

by Robert Silverberg

New popes bring new doctrines, and the canny theologian who is now Pope Benedict XVI has begun making his mark on the Roman Catholic Church by, among other things, speaking in favor of the idea that it is time

to make an end to the churchly concept of “Limbo”—putting Limbo in limbo, so to speak. Ordinarily a change in Roman Catholic dogma would hold very little direct significance for most of the readers of a science fiction magazine, but in this case, as I'll demonstrate in a moment, there's a definite SF angle. The concept of Limbo got into Catholic terminology by way of St. Thomas Aquinas, the great thirteenth-century theologian, whose primary metaphysical achievement was to reconcile the thinking of the pre-Christian philosophers Plato and Aristotle with the doctrines of the Roman church. (By way of full disclosure: I am not now and never have been any sort of Christian, Roman Catholic or otherwise, and though I've read widely in religious texts it has been purely in the spirit of anthropological research, not as a manifestation of belief.) Eight hundred years before the time of Aquinas, an earlier theologian, St. Augustine, had considered the problem of babies who die before they can be baptized. Baptism washes away original sin, the taint brought upon the human race by Adam and Eve, who ate the forbidden apples in Eden. But what about babies who die unbaptized? Augustine concluded that they are, alas, excluded from Heaven and must suffer the torments of Hell along with all other unbaptized souls.

Aquinas found this notion repugnant, as I suppose I would if I believed in Hell in the first place. His solution was Limbo: a place in the afterlife reserved for unbaptized babies—and also the Hebrew patriarchs, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, et al., who were unquestionably persons of virtue but who, because they had lived before the time of Jesus, had been deprived by that technicality of inclusion in the Christian Heaven. According to Aquinas it was unfair to condemn innocent babes to suffer in Hell merely because there had been no time to baptize them, and it was manifestly nonsensical to send the great Biblical patriarchs there. On the other hand, the church taught that baptism was necessary for admission to Heaven, and the babies and the patriarchs had not undergone that rite, so it was impossible to let them in. Limbo was a useful compromise—a place that was neither Heaven nor Hell. (The word “limbo” comes from the Latin *limbus*, meaning “hem” or “border.”)

The most famous literary reference to Limbo can be found in the fourth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, in which Dante, following Virgil, his guide, enters the First Circle of Hell and finds it to be a somewhat revised version of Aquinas' Limbo. In Dante's version it seems like a pleasant

enough place: there is a meadow, a stream, a seven-walled castle where its inhabitants dwell. The Biblical patriarchs aren't there, because Jesus had personally descended into Limbo to rescue the lot of them, from Adam and Noah on down, but Dante's Limbo does contain the souls of other men, women, and children who had lived lives free of sin but had not been able to receive the sacrament of baptism: what Dante calls the "virtuous pagans," among them Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the astronomer Ptolemy, the mathematician Euclid, the poets Homer, Horace, and Ovid, the great doctors Hippocrates and Galen, and such well-known figures of the classical world as Cicero, Seneca, and Julius Caesar. A surprising inclusion is the Moslem hero Saladin, Sultan of Egypt in the time of the Crusades, who certainly could have been baptized if he had wanted to, which, of course, he did not. (The lordly Saladin sits in splendid isolation, though if he had cared to have the company of other members of his faith in Limbo he could have sought out the twelfth-century Arab philosopher Averroes, author of a famous commentary on Aristotle, or the third Muslim resident, the physician Avicenna.) Even more astonishingly, Dante also includes in his group of virtuous pagans a remarkable collection of mythical and fictional characters: Orpheus, Hector, Aeneas, and the Amazon queen Pen-thesia, a character in the *Iliad*.

Since Dante's day the church has found the idea of Limbo an embarrassment, not only because it exposed a troublesome conflict between the teachings of the two great masters, Augustine and Aquinas, but also because denying newborn children the blessings of Heaven on a technicality began to seem like a chilly dogma indeed. Eventually Augustine's position was disposed of by a ruling declaring it his own private opinion, not a binding church dogma. That still left Aquinas' Limbo on the books; but, about 1985, Pope John Paul II appointed a commission of thirty theologians to come up with "a more coherent and illuminating" doctrine, and one member of that commission was Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict, who expressed his belief that "Limbo was never a defined truth of faith. Personally ... I would abandon it, since it was only a theological hypothesis." Now that he is Pope, he has indicated his support for a 1994 church document that said of children who die without baptism that "the church can only entrust them to the mercy of God," which would allow innocent but unbaptized babes to have the solace of Heaven, and dismisses Limbo as unnecessary. The current anti-Limbo

movement has come under attack by conservative churchmen who think that abolishing it will weaken the significance of baptism, but it is likely soon to win formal ratification.

While the Catholic Church has wrestled with the Limbo idea for centuries (Protestants reject it as unsupported by Biblical authority), poets have felt free to use it in all sorts of interesting ways. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, in his spooky poem “Limbo,” written about 1817, depicted it as a realm on the borderline between reality and non-reality, a sort of hyperspace whose inhabitants dwell in a perpetual waking nightmare of utter stasis:

“’Tis a strange place, this Limbo—not a Place,
Yet name it so; where Time & weary Space
Fettered from flight, with nightmare sense of fleeing,
Strive for their last crepuscular half-being....”

It is, he said, a place “barren and soundless as the measuring sands,” that “frightens Ghosts as Ghosts here frighten men.” What he found so frightful was “the mere Horror of blank Naught-at-all.”

A nasty thought, yes. Coleridge's Limbo is very different from Dante's, that pleasant zone on the outskirts of Hell where virtuous pagans like Homer and Socrates whiled away their post-mortem centuries to the tunes of Orpheus' lyre. Shakespeare, too, had a bleak view of it—in *Henry VIII* he uses “the Limbo of the Fathers” as a synonym for prison—and in *Paradise Lost* (1665) John Milton—no Catholic he—makes it a generic term, having Satan, wandering through the world, come upon “a limbo large and broad,” which Milton tells us is also known as “the Paradise of Fools”—the original fool's paradise. This is a place where “the fruits of painful superstition and blind zeal” are to be found, “all the unaccomplished works of Nature's hand,” a place full of “embryos and idiots,” and “hermits and friars ... with all their trumpery” as well, and in a furiously anti-Catholic passage he describes the winds of Limbo tossing about “relics, beads, indulgences, dispenses, pardons, bulls,” and other Papist paraphernalia. Milton also lets us know that this ghastly Limbo is somewhere on Earth, “not in the neighboring Moon, as some have dreamed.” This is a direct reference to Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) an epic poem that Milton knew well and had in part translated from the Italian. And here we come to what is, from our science fictional point of view, the most interesting Limbo of all—a lunar Limbo.

In *Orlando Furioso* a knight named Astolfo travels to the Moon aboard a griffin and finds there not the barren orb that Neil Armstrong and Alan Shepard saw, but a vast realm stacked high with great heaps of things. Ariosto's Limbo is "a place wherein is wonderfully stored whatever on our earth below we lose. Collected there are all things whatsoever, lost through time, chance, or our own folly here": unfulfilled vows, broken treaties, unheeded prayers, desires that have led to nothing, useless fame, advice that has been ignored, and also such things as the discarded crowns of Persian and Assyrian kings, the promises of great men, the gifts presented by courtiers to princes, and many another artifact of human futility. A great pool of spilled porridge turns out to contain "charity, by sick men willed for distribution after they were dead." A mound of twigs and limes: the witcheries of flirtatious women. And so on and so on, a wondrously corrosive stream of mockery, a harshly satirical lunar fantasy. (The seventeenth-century poet Alexander Pope, echoing Ariosto in *The Rape of the Lock*, added a few touches of his own to Limbo-on-the-Moon: "The smiles of harlots and the tears of heirs, Cages for gnats, and chains to yoke a flea.")

In our own less poetic era Limbo seems to have acquired a new and appropriately twenty-first-century meaning. A bit of Googling around led me to the news that "Limbo is a new programming language, designed by Sean Dorward, Phil Winterbottom, and Rob Pike. Limbo borrows from, among other things, C (expression syntax and control flow), Pascal (declarations), Winterbottom's Alef (abstract data types and channels), and Hoare's CSP and Pike's Newsqueak (processes.) Limbo is strongly typed, provides automatic garbage collection, supports only very restricted pointers, and compiles into machine-independent byte code for execution on a virtual machine."

Automatic garbage collection! Newsqueak! Very restricted pointers! Machine-independent byte code! There's poetry here too, my friends, though it's poetry in a language I don't speak. ("Limbo also provides Unicode strings, arrays of arbitrary types, lists of arbitrary types, tuples....") What are tuples, you may ask? "In effect, unnamed structures with unnamed members of arbitrary types."

We are a long way here, I think, from Aquinas' Limbo on the borders of Hell, or Dante's seven-sided castle, or Ariosto's lunar Limbo of wasted time, or Milton's Paradise of Fools. As the church throws its Limbo

overboard, the computer guys give us a new one. One way or another, it seems, we will always find a Limbo of some sort available close at hand as the centuries roll along.

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BASELINE

by Greg Beatty

My stride is firm and steady.
I'm proud in my own strength.
Till my brother flies o'erhead,
resplendent on photovoltaic wings.

—

My thoughts are quick and dear.
I rejoice in easy invention,
then my sister smiles,
projecting myriad realities in easy rainbows.

—

My voice is firm and clear.
I should be glad to speak,
but gall stills my tongue
at the irrational shame
of being a human baseline
maintained at genetic normalcy
in a world of augmentations
and sibs raised to divinity.

—Greg Beatty

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THE TRIAL

by Brian Stableford

Brian Stableford's novel *Streaking* (PS Publishing, 2006) was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award. His other recent works include a mammoth reference book, *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge, 2006), and a theatrical fantasy, *The New Faust at the Tragicomique* (Black Coat Press, 2007). Brian's most recent stories for us, "The Plurality of Worlds" (August 2006) and "Doctor Muffet's Island" (March 2007), have chronicled the alternate sixteenth century exploits of Sir Walter

Raleigh, Captain Cook, and John Dee. In “The Trial,” Brian takes a break from stories about a made-up past to explore the source of our own fickle memories.

Tom Wharton shook his head sadly as he moved away from Mrs. Heatherington's bed, reluctantly marking a red X against her name. It was the third X in a row, and it was a bitter disappointment. There was only one more of the new intake to be checked, and if that one turned out to be a reject too the trial would be stalled for an entire week.

The main problem was that by the time Alzheimer's sufferers actually got admitted to a ward they were usually too far gone even to attempt the battery of cognitive tests that the trial required as a key indicator. Sufferers who were still in the community, on the other hand, mostly hadn't had their diagnosis confirmed with sufficient certainty. Patients suitable for the trial had to be caught within a very narrow margin of the observation regime, and the trial's protocols were way too tight to allow Tom any wriggle-room when it came to judgments of suitability.

“Hello, Mr. Asherson,” he said, as he arrived by the next bedside. “How are you feeling today?”

“Name, rank, and serial number, you fascist bastard,” Mr. Asherson replied. “That's all you'll get from me.” Asherson was no spring chicken, but he was significantly younger than Mrs. Heatherington and most of the other human wrecks littering the ward. He was sitting up in the bed, and there was an angry but slightly puzzled glare in his eyes, as if something he couldn't quite put his finger on had deeply offended his moral sensibilities. His memory was playing tricks, though. He'd spent the greater part of his working life in secondary schools teaching biology and physical education; he wasn't old enough ever to have been a prisoner of war.

“That's all I need, Mr. Asherson,” Tom said, cheerfully, as he flicked over the sheets on his clipboard looking for further background information. “What is your name, rank and serial number?”

“William Asherson,” the old man replied. “Sergeant-Major. Six ... six ... six...?” His impetus ran out.

Tom found the detailed notes he was looking for. The serial number that William Asherson had been given during his only brief spell of military experience—while he was on National Service in 1949-50—had not, in fact, begun with the digits 666, and he had only attained the lowly rank of corporal before returning to civilian life. He had apparently

exaggerated his achievements to his family, though; there was a scrawled note from the appraisal nurse to the effect that Asherson's daughter, Mrs. Patricia Lockley, had confirmed—in flat contradiction to Army records—that he really had been a sergeant-major, even though she knew that his claim to have once been in the SAS was a pure fantasy, belatedly made up to impress his infant grandson in the 1980s.

“I'd just like to run a few little tests, Mr. Asherson, if that's all right,” Tom said, carefully maintaining his broad smile. “Nothing painful or tedious—just puzzles, really.”

“If it'll get me out of here,” Asherson replied. “I need to get out. I don't belong here with all these *old* people. They're all sick, you know. Sick, sick, sick.”

Tom was heartened by the relative sanity of this response. It meant that Asherson was still in good enough condition to engage in what passed for merry banter in these parts. He sat down beside the bed, detached the screen from his laptop, and placed it carefully in front of the patient—who looked at it with frank distaste but refrained from doing any violence to it.

Half an hour later Tom had determined that Mr. Asherson was in good enough condition to relish a certain amount of attention and a little mental exercise, and was able to grapple more or less successfully with the series of mental tests used to measure the effects of LAW-1917. The old man had become frustrated when he failed tests that he felt he ought to have passed—some of which he seemed certain that he *had* passed, in spite of the computer's insistence that he had not—but he had completed each one without forgetting what it was that he was trying to do, and that could be counted a triumph in itself, in this particular context.

His achievements entitled Mr. Asherson to a big tick on Tom's list—whose inscription brought a big sigh of relief from the beleaguered junior doctor. The trial was making painfully slow progress, but at least it was still on track. William Asherson would be the eleventh subject out of a required sixteen—always provided, of course, that Patricia Lockley could be persuaded to sanction his acceptance on to the program. It was very rare for anyone to refuse, though; most relatives considered it a great opportunity for their fast-fading loved ones to be given privileged access to new experimental treatments.

“If I can get the consent form signed today, I'll see you again tomorrow, Mr. Asherson,” Tom said, making the effort to be pleasant even

though he confidently expected that Mr. Asherson would not retain the slightest memory of him until the next day. "You'll have a room all to yourself, and you'll be known as Patient K. That'll be your codename for a secret mission—perhaps the last you'll ever have to carry out."

"Never volunteer," the newly promoted Patient K advised him. "All present and correct, sir—sod off and die, you Sandhurst ponce. Get me the hell out of here. Sick sick sick."

"Just sick enough—not to mention just thick enough—to earn you a big tick, Mr. Asherson," Tom said, blithely. "You're the pick of the bunch today. That's the advantage of having been a teacher; you might lose your marbles but you never lose the habit of rising to a challenge."

As he supervised the final preparations in the treatment room the following morning, Tom tried hard to think of any advantages there might be in carrying out trials on Alzheimer's patients which might compensate for all the awful inconveniences. The only obvious one, he decided, was the lack of half-informed bolshiness. Alzheimer's sufferers were notoriously stropky, of course—but only randomly. They weren't calculatedly stropky in the grimly determined way that many healthy volunteers now set out to be in the wake of the TGN-1412 disaster at Northwick Park, perennially on the lookout for the possibility of a juicy compensation payout to augment their participation fees.

Mr. Asherson was certainly stropky enough, in his own quietly perverse fashion. He hadn't taken well to being moved.

"Putting me in solitary, are you, you black bitch?" he said to Sarah Odiko, the nurse who was assisting Tom. "You won't break me. Name, rank, and serial number."

"Please don't abuse the staff, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. He had changed his tone from cheery to soothing, because that usually worked best in the circumstances. "You're very lucky to be here. There are people clamoring to be let in on trials like these."

He was telling the truth. The Northwick Park incident hadn't inhibited the flow of volunteers at all. Indeed, by informing a much larger population of cash-strapped young men about the easy money to be made from participation in drug trials—which usually didn't send their immune systems into crazy overdrive—it had actually increased recruitment, albeit with the compensating downside that the volunteers in question were much louder in the proclamation of their "rights." Not that they actually

cared about the precise exercise of the principle of informed consent, of course, or the minute details of the experimental design; they just wanted to lay the groundwork for future lawsuits, in case anything did go wrong.

That wasn't the only way in which Tom's job had become a great deal more stressful since the TGN-1142 affair. He knew as well as everyone else that the disaster could just as easily have struck St. Jude's as any other hospital, and that no matter how many extra precautions were taken, something similar might happen to him at any time. While no one had known that an "immune system frenzy" was anything more than a conjectural possibility, ignorance had permitted complacency, but now that the possibility had been luridly demonstrated it hung over every new trial of a monoclonal antibody like the sword of Damocles. It wasn't as if the regulatory authority could just slap a ban on the whole class of treatments—so many of them worked that the small risk of the occasional trial going badly awry was not only acceptable but necessary.

"I need to get out of here," the newly appointed Patient K complained. "Have to see a man about a horse."

"No you don't, Mr. Asherson," Nurse Odiko informed him. "You've got a catheter for that."

"You have to take your medicine now, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. "Just drink it down."

"No," Asherson said. "Nasty taste."

"It doesn't taste nasty, Mr. Asherson," Tom assured him. "It's wonderful stuff. Just between the two of us, though, it's been a bit awkward finding people who can benefit from it. It's specific to a narrow range of neuronal intranuclear inclusions, you see, and if the results of the trial are to be meaningful it's necessary to be sure that the magic bullet is being aimed at the right target. If the trial were to record a negative result, and post mortems carried out six months or a year down the line were then to reveal that a significant number of our subjects had been suffering from CJD or some other exotic CAG-repetition dysfunction, the whole thing would have to be done over—and my reputation would be indelibly scarred. Fortunately, Mr. Asherson, we know that you have exactly the right kind of gunk gumming up your tired old brain, and you're still sufficiently *compos mentis* to do the cognitive tests I have to administer." He paused to check whether the sound of his voice was having the desired effect. It wasn't. "That's puzzles, to you," he added, with a sigh. "Just

swallow it, for Christ's sake. You're not scared, are you? What kind of soldier-turned-teacher are you?"

"Sandhurst twit," Asherson opined, looking at Tom the way he might have looked at a slug on his kitchen table—but he eventually consented to swallow his allotted dose of LAW-1917.

"That's good," Tom said, as Sarah Odiko moved into position to monitor Patient K's heart-rate and blood-pressure. He carried on talking, for distraction's sake, making every effort to keep his voice level and friendly. "Everything will be fine, Mr. Asherson. We're pretty sure about that, because patients A to J were all okay. The disaster at Northwick Park wouldn't have been nearly so bad, you know, if they'd staggered the administration of the drug. Once the first patient had gone into frenzy, the others could have been spared the necessity. While I'm only able to administer LAW-1917 to one or two patients a week, there's no danger of a simultaneous meltdown of my entire sample. On the other hand, if the Northwick Park trial *had* been staggered, no one would ever have known for sure whether or not the first patient's reaction was an idiosyncratic one that might not have affected the other members of the group. In my experience, every trial tends to turn up one hypersensitive reaction and one contradictory reaction, no matter how consistent the rest of the results are. Humans just aren't as similar to one another as mice. On the other hand, they can do cognitive tests, so you get a much clearer idea of the nature and extent of the effect that drugs are having on their gummed-up brains. It's all a matter of swings and roundabouts, isn't it, Mr. Asherson?"

"Met Eileen at the fair," Asherson commented. "Real fair—coconut shies and everything. Lousy ferris wheel, but what did I care? Sick sick sick. Is Eileen coming to see me today? She came to see me yesterday."

Tom carefully refrained from reminding Asherson that his wife was dead, and that the woman he occasionally mistook for her was his daughter. "Everything okay, Sarah?" he said to the nurse.

"Fine," she said. "BP up to one-thirty over ninety. Pulse eighty-five."

"Good," Tom said. "I'll do the first set of tests now, to set the baseline. Wheel the screen into position, will you?"

The display-panel used for the tests in the dedicated trial room was much more impressive than the one on Tom's laptop. It was a nineteen-inch flat screen mounted on the end of a mechanical arm connected to the main body of the computer by a slender bundle of cables enclosed in a

plastic tube. Tom was able to sit beside the bed, facing the screen aslant, with the keyboard on a mobile desk in front of him.

"You know how we do this one, don't you, Mr. Asherson?" Tom said. "All you have to do is watch out for the lemon, and touch the screen when it appears."

Asherson couldn't remember how to do the test, but he caught on quickly enough when it was demonstrated. He was willing to oblige, in spite of uttering the judgment that it was all a waste of time and that he really needed to get away. He became less and less willing as the run went on, but Tom was able to complete the series. The results, as expected, were much the same as those he'd obtained the day before.

"That's fine, Mr. Asherson," Tom said, when he was through. "You can have your lunch now, and then a little nap, if you want. I'll tell your daughter that she can come in to see you, so that she can make sure that you're comfortable. I'll come back at five to do the second run—by which time, of course, you'll probably have forgotten all about the first run, so it will all seem fresh. We won't have to worry too much about the possibility of educative bias unless you actually begin to show some improvement. That's another advantage this trial has over the ones that only test the healthy, now I come to think about it. Things aren't as bad as we sometimes imagine, are they? Okay, Sarah—you're in charge."

"Officers are wankers," Patient K opined. "Lions led by donkeys, we were. Sick sick sick."

According to Mr. Asherson's biography, which Tom had scrutinized more carefully since awarding the big tick, the teacher had served briefly in the Far East before completing his National Service, but he'd never been in anything the Army was prepared to define as a "conflict situation." No matter what he'd told his children and his grandchildren thereafter, or what he was trying to tell Tom now, he'd never had the chance to be a *real* lion. He'd still been at school during World War II, and hadn't even suffered the indignity of being an evacuee.

"Lie down like a lamb, there's a good chap," Tom said, in his best paternal manner. "We'll see what kind of hero you are tonight—when your brain might be a little clearer, with luck and the benefits of LAW-1917. If so, we should see some *real* improvement tomorrow—although I shouldn't tell you that, strictly speaking, in case the expectation actuates some kind of placebo effect."

By now, Tom was genuinely optimistic about the possibility of improvement. Patients A to J had all shown some improved brain function, although some had done far better than others—and none of it was likely to be the result of a placebo effect, given the condition of the subjects. Those who'd done best of all, in fact, were still showing clear benefits two to six weeks later, and there seemed to be every possibility that more than half of their number would hang on long enough to take further treatment, if and when the program was able to move into Phase Two. All in all, the trial was going well in spite of the time it was taking.

* * * *

Simon Phipps, the English rep from the company on whose behalf the trial was being carried out, was waiting in Tom's office when he got back.

"It's going well," Tom said, turning his clipboard around so that Phipps could see the long columns of numbers, ticks, and crosses.

"Patient K," Phipps read off the top of the sheet. "He's your only one this week? That still leaves L to P to find."

"Four more weeks," Tom said. "Six tops. In the meantime, you can buy me lunch. Have to be the canteen, mind—the protocol requires me to stay on the premises during the period of administration, in case of an adverse reaction."

Phipps made no objection; bribing doctors with the occasional lunch was part of his job description. He even had the grace to wait until Tom had finished eating before he started whining about the time the trial was taking. "With the benefit of hindsight," he said, "we'd have done better to split the trial between two hospitals, so as to cast the sampling net more widely."

"No you wouldn't," Tom told him, wearily. "You've already got two for the price of one—the consultant at the Main is working with me, referring potential candidates for the trial here."

"A bigger city, then," Phipps countered. "Birmingham or Manchester. There's no shortage of senile old fools in Manchester."

"No, but they mostly stay at home till they rot, because their offspring accept their decline as part of the normal pattern of life, and they all have complications—mostly lung cancer and chronic obesity. Down here, you have senile old fools whose loving offspring offload them on to the NHS at the first opportunity, some of whom are in pretty good physical nick, apart from their CAG-repeat neuronal intranuclear inclusions. The flow is slow,

but it's good quality. Patient K is a pearl—a career teacher at a middle-of-the-road selective school, who started out in the days when you needed common sense and mental toughness and took his BEd in his spare time. Kept his *mens sana* in good shape teaching biology and his *corpore sano* in tip-top condition teaching PE. Never smoked, and stayed fit enough to con his grandchildren into believing that he was once in the SAS. You don't get many like him up in Manchester. We don't want our precious trial to turn up negative results because the subjects are all crap, do we?"

"So I can tell the Germans that the results will be positive, then?" Phipps said, eagerly, as they left the canteen to walk back to Tom's office. "They might not mind the extra wait if I can promise them that it'll be worth it."

"It's too soon to sound the trumpet," Tom said, scrupulously. "With K to P yet to be assessed, there's still time for the numbers to take a downturn, or for some perverse sod to have a bad reaction. On the whole, though, I'd say that all the signs are good. The stuff really does seem to gee up the T-cells almost immediately, and enables them to home in right away on the gunk that's doing the damage. If I were a betting man, I'd be prepared to have a judicious punt on the possibility that your bosses will one day be able to whisper the sacred syllable where it's never been whispered before. We'll have to be very careful about getting the dosage exactly right, though, so we'll have to be even more painstaking in Phase Two. It'll be worth it in the long run. Trust me."

Phipps knew that the "sacred syllable" was *cure*, but he'd been in the business too long to allow himself to get overly excited about Tom's carefully moderated optimism. "You'd better be *very* careful, then," he said. "The one thing the Germans hate worse than things going wrong at the outset is having a trial drag on for years, spinning off promises and expectations all the while, and then have it go tits up at the last hurdle."

"It could happen," Tom admitted, as he unlocked his office door and moved aside to let Phipps precede him. "Lap of the gods, mate—but we have to stay positive. One day at a time."

"I hate these monoclonal antibody deals," Phipps confessed, as he leaned against the office wall, spurning the armchair that was set deliberately low so that Tom could look down on patients and visiting administrators alike. "Too nerve-racking."

"We'd better get used to it," Tom said, as he took his own chair. "Monoclonal antibodies are here to stay, and there are thousands more in Big Pharma's pipeline. Anyway, it's me who'll take the worst of the shrapnel if anything does explode in our faces. I'm the guy at the sharp end—you're just a suit in a chain of command."

"Don't give me that, Tom," the rep retorted. "If anything were to happen, you'd pass the buck to me without pausing to draw breath—and it wouldn't be nearly so easy for me to get rid..." He might have said more, but there was a knock on the office door just then, and Patricia Lockley, née Asherson, came in without waiting to be invited.

"He seems *much* better, doctor," she gushed. "I can't thank you enough for getting him on to the trial. I'm really glad they referred us here from the Main. I think it's wonderful."

"Sit down, Mrs. Lockley, please," Tom said, not bothering to glance sideways at Phipps to underline the significance of the remark about the referral. "There's no need to thank me—we're very grateful to you for allowing Bill to participate. This is Simon Phipps, by the way—he works for the company that developed LAW-1917."

"We're very optimistic about it," Phipps said. "Dr. Wharton is doing a terrific job—your father is in good hands."

"You mustn't expect too much, though," Tom put in. "Your father probably perked up a little because we've been giving him so much attention—and because he was pleased to see you, of course."

"That's exactly it," she said. "He was pleased to see me, and he knew who I was—didn't call me Eileen once. I haven't seen him tuck into lunch like that for months. It's a miracle."

"No, Mrs. Lockley, it isn't," Tom insisted. "It's too soon for the drug to have taken effect—we won't see any authentic improvement until this evening at the earliest. If the human immune system weren't so reactive, we wouldn't be able to see results as soon as that—but because it *is* so reactive, we have to be very careful not to overdo the dosage. We want the new T-cells to clear out some of the accumulated proteins that are stopping your father's brain from working properly, but we have to make certain that they don't start attacking the component that's necessary for the brain to function at all. It's early days yet."

"I know," Patricia Lockley said, blithely unaware of her own inconsistency, "but it's wonderful all the same."

* * * *

"Dr. Wharton, is it?" Asherson said, when Tom turned up to administer the second battery of tests. "All swings and roundabouts."

"Very good, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. "I can see that you'll zoom through the tests without a hitch this time."

"I was in the SAS," Asherson told him. "I've had survival training. Kill a man with my bare hands."

"I'm sure you can," Tom agreed, taking his seat at the keyboard as Nurse Odiko moved the screen back into position, "but your experience as a teacher might stand you in better stead today. Can you spot the lemon?"

"Sandhurst wimp," Asherson opined. "Never done a day's work in your life, have you? Bare hands. Met Eileen at the fair. Sick sick sick. Is she coming back?"

"Please try to concentrate, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. "I really need to do these tests, to see whether the drug has begun to work yet."

"Law six six six" Asherson said—but he had already begun to tap the screen when the lemons appeared. "Stagger the trial. No meltdown. Swings and roundabouts. Arsehole."

"It's ell-ay-doubleyew-1917, Mr. Asherson," Tom told him. "But you did well to notice that the letters spell *law*. That's the teacher in you, although you seem to have mislaid him temporarily and got stuck in your teens, way back in 1949. Now this one's a bit more complicated. Do you remember it?"

"Yes," said Asherson, shortly—and it seemed that he did, because he passed with flying colors, without any need for an explanation of what he was supposed to do.

That was just the beginning. By the time the series of tests was complete, Tom's record sheet was a solid mass of ticks and tens. "That's very, very good, Mr. Asherson," he said. "You've gone straight to the top of the class. If you can do that again tomorrow morning I'll have to move you on to the Level Two tests and open up a whole new category of potential improvement."

"Won't be here," Asherson said. "Things to do, got to get out. Mission to take on. Agent K. Secret. Can I have more medicine now? I need more medicine before I go."

"That's *Patient* K, Mr. Asherson," Tom told him. "Yes, you are on a mission—but your mission is to stay here. That's very important. We have

a job to do, you and I. We need to prove that Alzheimer's will be curable one day, and that LAW-1917 is one of the magic bullets that can do the trick. You mustn't take any more medicine, because it would be dangerous. We can't even sedate you, I'm afraid—although you should try to get some sleep. Nurse Odiko's shift is over now, but Nurse Kasicka will stay with you all night. I'll be just down the corridor. I'll be here all night too."

Simon Phipps was waiting outside the door, having put off driving home until the latest results were in. "Good?" he said.

"Brilliant," Tom said, dubiously. "Good enough to lift the average improvement between tests one and two by a point and a half—if he continues to improve he'll break the record easily."

"You don't sound unduly delighted about it," Phipps remarked.

"It's never entirely good news when one set of results is so far out of line with the others," Tom told him, "although I suppose it's expectable, given that he had a more intellectually demanding job than A to J. Even so, you don't want a drug's effects to be too variable, especially a dose-sensitive drug like this one. Patricia Lockley was right—he's made so much progress so fast that it's almost a miracle. The trouble is, if the effect continues to increase at this pace, he might already have overdosed. If the new T-cells start clearing healthy proteins as well as the NIIs, it could kill him."

"You mean he might go into the frenzy thing?"

"No. If something like that were going to happen his physiological indicators would already be going hyper, and they're not. His pulse and bp are sound as a bell. I mean that his brain might simply stop working—coma, PVS, then stone dead."

"You can't let that happen," Phipps said.

"No, obviously not. At the first adverse sign, I'll start medication—but even if I can stop the process going all the way, your trial will be well and truly messed up."

"It's *our* trial, Tom—and that *us* isn't just you and me, but the expectant Germans as well. So far, it's just an improvement, right? So far, it's all good. I can tell them that."

"Sure you can," Tom said. "If I were you, though, I'd let it simmer tonight and pop back first thing in the morning to see how things stand then. If the situation's stabilized ... well, if that's the case, you might just find the sacred syllable dancing on my lips."

"I'll do that," Phipps promised.

* * * *

Phipps was as good as his word; he arrived at Asherson's room just as Sarah Odiko was changing places with Petra Kasicka again. The rep didn't wait outside this time; he came in to see what was going on.

What was going on was that Tom was checking the log of the computer, whose keyboard was on William Asherson's lap. Asherson's eyes were glued to the screen, which displayed a chessboard.

"He's been playing for two hours," Tom whispered to Phipps. "Petra says that he didn't sleep a wink all night. When he got bored he insisted on running though the test-program I'd set up, and she had to let him do it in order to keep him quiet. After that, he started searching for something better, first on the hospital intranet and then on the web. He played a few chase-and-shoot games before he found the lightning chess program. He played nine games on level one, losing all but the last, then moved on to level two. He lost the first game on that level but won the second, and he seems to be winning the third.

"I can hear you, you know," Asherson said, without moving his eyes from the screen. "It took me a while to learn the game, but I think I've got the hang of it now."

Tom turned away from Simon Phipps to look at the patient. "You must have played chess before, Mr. Asherson. You haven't really learned it from scratch this morning. Don't you remember the school where you used to teach?"

"I tried it in the army," Asherson said, "but I couldn't get the hang of it. I don't know why not—it seems easy enough now. It's just a matter of persisting until it clicks, I suppose. Can I have more medicine now? I really need to get out of here, but I need my medicine first."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Asherson," Tom said, "but you're part of a clinical trial, and we have to stick very rigidly to the protocol. One dose is all you get—at least until you qualify for Phase Two, which we might be able to begin in a couple of months, if the rest of Phase One works out."

"To hell with protocol," said Asherson, finally looking away from the screen, having checkmated the computer. "We're talking about my brain here. I'm better, and I intend to stay that way. You're right, of course—I could play chess. I do remember the school—but that's not important. I've

got things to do. You'd better not mess me about, Dr. Wharton. I used to be in the SAS."

"No, you didn't, Mr. Asherson," Tom replied, almost without thinking. "That's just a story you made up to tell your grandson."

Asherson's eyes narrowed momentarily, then widened again. "Is it?" he said, with sudden uncertainty. "I thought..." He fell silent.

"I suppose I'd better search out some new tests, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. "Something tells me that you've moved beyond level two of Elementary Cognition. If the biology teacher's beginning to resurface, we'll need tests considerably more challenging."

"LAW-1917," Asherson said. "Monoclonal antibody originated in Germany, name of company withheld in accordance with client confidentiality policy. Original compound derived from mice, humanized to make it acceptable to the human immune system, tested in that form on rats. Stimulates the production of white blood corpuscles capable of the elective ingestion and metabolic breakdown of a CAG-repeat derivative of an enkephalin allegedly responsible for the renewal of neurons. Am I right?"

"That's the gist of it," Tom agreed. "You haven't just been busy playing games, I see. If you understand that much, though, you must understand why it would be dangerous to risk an overdose."

"Wrong assumption," Asherson said, in a blithely patronizing manner that he must have honed to perfection in the classroom. "You think it would be a bad thing to clear out *all* the CAG-repeat protein, because some of it must be performing some function that determined the selective value of the gene, albeit less efficiently than the normal version. That's not a danger. I need a second dose, Dr. Wharton. You have to give it to me. Admittedly, it'll remove one of the subjects from your trial—but efficient treatment takes ethical priority. I need the second dose, and you have no ethical grounds for withholding it."

There you go, Tom thought. Bring them back from Alzheimer's hell and they just turn into exactly the same kind of self-important prick that blights all the other trials. He'll be suing for compensation next because we refused to top up his medication.

"That's not true, Mr. Asherson," Simon Phipps said, in the meantime. "If you were in mortal danger, Tom could abort this run of the trial to give you life-saving treatment, but you're obviously doing very well. We're not

taking you out of the trial, Mr. Asherson. We need you in it. You're the best ad we've got!"

"Shut up, Simon," Tom said, sharply. "What makes you think the assumption is wrong, Mr. Asherson?"

"The protein's function isn't essential in the way you think it is, Dr. Wharton," Asherson said. "It doesn't matter if the whole supply is wiped out—no, I take that back. It *does* matter, but not in the way you think. It won't hurt me, Dr. Wharton. Quite the reverse. I need that second dose, and you have to give it to me."

"You have to be more specific, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. "I'd need a sound physiological reason for breaking protocol. You'll have to explain to me exactly what effect you think the second dose will have, and exactly how you've reached that conclusion. If the case were strong enough, I'd have to concede—but the science has to be in place. You understand that, as a biologist."

Asherson hesitated for a moment, then smiled. "Clever bugger, aren't you?" he said. "That's Sandhurst for you. Give me time, and the use of the computer, and I'll put the case together. Every i dotted and every t crossed. You mustn't worry about losing a subject from your test, Mr. Phipps. The drug works, and the subjects will demonstrate that, even if you can't find another K like me. A to J have already shown that it has a modest beneficial effect on patients in worse condition than I was, while I can offer a tantalizing glimpse of its ultimate potential, as well as serving my own purposes. It's all swings and roundabouts, isn't it, Dr. Wharton? I met my wife at the fair, you know. Is she coming to see me today?"

Tom thought very carefully before speaking. Eventually, he said: "All right, Mr. Asherson. I'll give you time to put together a case, and the use of the computer. I want you to do something for me, though. I want to download an IQ test, and I'd like you to complete it, if you would. I still need a way of tracking your progress, you see. Even if you eventually come out of the official trial, I need to monitor you very carefully. You're my patient, remember—you're my responsibility."

"Arsehole," Asherson said. "Okay, I'll do your test. Don't be surprised if I beat you, though. I was in the SAS."

Tom reached out and took the keyboard, placing it carefully on the desk before starting to type. After a couple of minutes, he said: "It's all

set, Mr. Asherson. You have an hour. I'll leave you to it—when you want me to come back, just ask Nurse Odiko to page me."

Simon Phipps wanted to start an argument as soon as they were back in Tom's office, but Tom wouldn't join in. "He's right, Simon," he said. "He's still confused, but he's right. It would be better if the official trial showed up consistent moderate results—but if he *can* give us a glimpse of further possibilities without relapsing, going completely off his head or dying on us, we could be way ahead of the game."

"Three big ifs," Phipps commented. "He's already halfway off his head, if you ask me. Remembering how to play chess is one thing, but putting together a scientific paper evaluating the function of an enkephalin is something else."

"I know," Tom said. "That's why I asked him to do it. We're in uncharted waters here, Simon—we're not in classical experimental design mode any more, we're in kick-it-and-see-how-it-reacts mode. If his brain *can* continue to function in any sort of respectable and responsible fashion ... this could be big. Aren't you glad you dropped in?"

"I would be," Phipps told him, "if I didn't suspect that a passed buck might come flying at my head any second."

William Asherson called them back after forty minutes. He hadn't stopped early because he'd finished the test, but because he'd got bored. "That's good enough," he said to Tom. He activated the computer's automatic scorer himself, but frowned with dissatisfaction when his score came up as 151. "Shit," he said. "I used to get that sort of score before. I thought I'd got at least two hundred now. I must have made a few mistakes. Sick sick sick."

"That's okay, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. "It's still an amazing performance for someone in your situation. We'll try again this afternoon. If you score even higher then..."

"I will," Asherson promised. "I won't make the same mistakes twice. You can get out again now. I need to prove to you that I'm telling the truth about the second dose—that it can't hurt me, and will do what I need it to do."

Tom obediently left the room again, taking Simon Phipps with him.

"That's one hell of an IQ score!" Phipps said. "Tom, you have *got* to keep that guy in the trial."

“Don't be ridiculous, Simon,” Tom said, as he hurried along the corridor to his office. “If all LAW-1917 had done was to ameliorate the symptoms of his creeping Alzheimer's, he wouldn't be able to get near an IQ of 151, even if he's telling the truth about racking up that sort of score in his youth. Something strange is happening. He has to be hypersensitive, obviously—but he might just be right about orthodox theory being based on a wrong assumption about the aberrant protein's normal function.”

“What's the right assumption, then?” Phipps wanted to know.

“I'm not sure. I'd dearly like to know what *he* thinks it is, though. Why is he so convinced that he needs a second dose? He could easily be barking up the wrong tree. He might have increased the speed at which he processes information very dramatically indeed, but he's still harboring delusions—and that could be a nasty combination. Efficient logic applied to false premises can lead to seriously weird conclusions.”

“I don't follow,” Phipps complained.

“IQ scores are very sensitive to the speed of information processing—they measure fast thinking rather than effective thinking. IQ tests pander to that, by presenting questions that have definite answers reachable by methodical logic. Open-ended questions are a different matter. He might go off the rails when he tries to supply his newfound calculative ability to something less neatly rule-bound than chess. He still thinks he was in the SAS, even though I've told him the truth. What's all this *sick sick sick* stuff? I thought the first time I heard it that it was one of the idiot puns that Alzheimer's patients sometimes make, twisting six six six ... but even if it were, we'd still have to account for his fascination with six six six.” By now, Tom was sitting in his chair, swinging the rotatable seat from side to side as if the swaying might aid his fevered thought-processes.

“Don't freak out on me, mate,” Phipps said. “If you don't calm down, I'll begin to suspect that you've been sampling the merchandise yourself. What do *you* think is wrong with the orthodox assumption about the enkephalin whose CAG-repeat variant clogs up the neurons of Alzheimer's sufferers?”

“I'm yet to be convinced that it is wrong,” Tom told him. “Given that natural selection built the protein into the genome and limited its expression to the brain, we have to assume that it serves some neurotransmissive function, and that it continues to serve that function even in the problematic form that eventually causes it to build up into

obstructive plaques—in which case, an overdose of any treatment that breaks down the plaques would be bound to sabotage normal brain function. If the new improved Asherson thinks that's wrong, he must think that even at its natural level—the level the healthier form of the protein routinely maintains in your brain and mine—the protein functions as an inhibitor, suppressing the efficiency of calculative thought, and maybe of memory too. Perhaps he thinks that if he takes a second dose, he'll become even smarter than he's already become—some kind of mental superman—or perhaps he thinks that he'll be able to improve his memory to a much greater extent than he's already achieved."

"Might he be right—or is he just crazy?"

"I don't know. If he *is* right ... well, LAW-1917 is more than a cure for Alzheimer's. If we can get the dose right, maybe we can *all* be mental supermen with perfect memories. But if that were the case, why would natural selection have equipped us with the enkephalin in the first place? If simply getting rid of it were enough to give us that kind of reward, we'd surely have got rid of it ourselves."

There was a knock on the door then, and Patricia Lockley came in without waiting for an invitation. "I just went in to see Dad," she said. "He's...." Words failed her. Her tone was by no means wholeheartedly enthusiastic.

"You were right and I was wrong," Tom told her. "It *is* a miracle."

"Will he be like that forever?" Mrs. Lockley said, hesitantly. Obviously, it wasn't a prospect she found totally attractive. She didn't mean "forever" literally, of course—but Tom didn't know, any longer, where the boundaries of possibility might lie.

"I have no idea," Tom said. "In patients A to J, the effect continued to develop for several days, but your father has made such a rapid improvement that he might already have peaked—and I have no way of knowing what further effects might materialize."

"He says he's got an IQ of two hundred," Mrs. Lockley said. "And he's *convinced* that he was in the SAS. He got angry when I told him that he wasn't. He said I was sick."

"Did he?" Tom asked. "If what he actually said was *sick sick sick* I don't think he meant you. Do you have any idea what it might mean? That or *six six six*?"

"That's the number of the beast in the Bible," she said, promptly.

"Apart from that. Something that *sick sick sick* might mean to your father, specifically."

"No. He always used to say that he'd never been sick in his life—he was fibbing, of course. He got colds like anyone else, and when it was flu he stayed in bed, like anybody else. Shouldn't you be looking after him if there's a danger of new effects?"

"Sarah will page me if any new symptoms appear," Tom told her. "Your father's working on a much harder test. He and I both needed time to think."

"What about?" Mrs. Lockley wanted to know.

"The logic of natural selection," Tom retorted, reflexively. "If he's right, and we're all walking around with our brains permanently muffled, running at a quarter of their potential efficiency, there has to be a logic to the situation—and if we knew what that logic is, we might be able to see why it would be a bad idea to take the muffler off."

"None of the other patients reacted this way, Mrs. Lockley," Phipps put in, trying to be helpful. "It's just him—something about him. We need to work out what it is, if we can."

"That's not the point, though," Tom said. "Yes, it's worked much faster and more powerfully on him than it did on anyone else, mercifully without his immune system going into overdrive, so his neuronal intranuclear inclusions must be much easier to break down than the average—but we've already proved that the NIIs can be broken down in other patients. We don't know that there's anything *qualitatively* different about him. If it's just a matter of degree ... damn!"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his vibrating pager. "That's Sarah," he said. "Either Bill's ready to show me his proof, or things have begun to go sour. Let's find out."

* * * *

Tom ran down the corridor and burst into the room reserved for his trial patients. Then he stopped dead, so suddenly that Simon Phipps ran into the back of him. Phipps muttered a curse, but Tom was dumbstruck.

William Asherson was out of bed. He had torn the line out of his forearm and detached the catheter. The sleeve of his gown was stained red. He was holding the hollow needle that had been transmitting fluid into his veins to the side of Sarah Odiko's neck, threatening to drive it into the

carotid artery. The nurse was terrified. Asherson's eyes were ablaze with determination.

"Dad!" Patricia Lockley protested, from the doorway. "What are you *doing*? You're a teacher, for God's sake!"

"I couldn't come up with a sound scientific proof, Dr. Wharton," Asherson said, mockingly. "But I knew you were bluffing, just to gain time. I'm not. If you don't bring me a second dose of LAW-1917 right now, I'll kill your nurse. I could do it with my bare hands, but the needle seems more symbolically appropriate. Is that a good enough reason for you?"

"Yes it is," Tom said, without hesitation. "I'll have to fetch the dose from the refrigerated locker in my office, but I'll do it right away. Don't worry, Sarah—everything will be okay."

"If you give him another dose he'll be eliminated from the trial!" Simon Phipps objected.

"I'm threatening to stab a nurse in the neck with a needle, Mr. Phipps," Asherson pointed out. "I think we can take it as read that I'm no longer a suitable candidate for your trial, don't you?"

"Shut the door behind me, Simon," Tom said. "Make sure no one else comes in. I'll be back in two minutes." He wasted no further time before running back down the corridor to do exactly as he'd promised.

Tom unlocked the cooler hurriedly, and measured out a dose of LAW-1917 into a small plastic cup. Then he carried it back to the trial room. He moved swiftly but carefully, to avoid the possibility of spillage.

The tableau within the other room was exactly as he'd left it.

"Here you are, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. "As your doctor, I have to advise you strongly against taking it. Whatever your opinion is of the quality of my assumptions, an overdose could kill you."

Asherson didn't let Sarah Odiko go. Tom had to lift the plastic cup to the old man's lips himself.

"You wouldn't be trying to fool me with a placebo, would you, Dr. Wharton?" Asherson said.

"No I wouldn't," Tom told him. "As you said to Simon, you're no longer Patient K. You're off the program—and you're calling the shots. You take it at your own risk. You've been warned."

"Wanker," Asherson said, and drained the tiny cup. Then he waited. They all waited, for what seemed like a ridiculously long time.

“Let the nurse go, Bill,” Tom said, exercising his very best bedside manner. “You’ve got what you wanted.”

Asherson seemed to have drifted off into a kind of reverie, but Tom’s voice brought him back to his senses. He looked at the nurse imprisoned by his left arm, and the needle in his left hand, as if he had never seen either of them before. It was as if he had suddenly reverted to the common state of Alzheimer’s patients, who were notoriously prone to episodes in which they completely lost the thread of their existential continuity.

Asherson reacted to the revelation of what he was doing with candid horror. He screamed, and hurled the needle at the wall behind the bed. He released his prisoner and cowered back—as if it were him, not her, who had the right to be terrified.

“Sick sick sick,” he said, in a tone redolent with astonishment. “Sick sick sick.” The second rendition was more plaintive than the first, almost agonized.

William Asherson covered his face with his hands, clutching at his eyebrows. It was almost as if he were trying to tear out his own eyes, but couldn’t quite get a grip on them. He wailed, but not loudly. It was more like an animal in despair than one in pain.

Patricia Lockley came forward and put her arms around Sarah Odiko protectively, as if to offer a guarantee that no further harm could come to her.

“It’s okay, Mr. Asherson,” Tom was quick to say. He reached out a hand as if in reassurance, but his legs refused to take a step forward. He was frightened of what his patient might do, if the old man’s next abrupt change of mood proved to be less self-accusing.

“What the hell do *you* know?” Asherson demanded. “Just because you’ve been to Sandhurst.”

“I’ve never been to Sandhurst,” Tom told him, quietly. “I’m Dr. Thomas Wharton—Tom. I went to Bristol University Medical School. I work here, at St. Jude’s Hospital, carrying out clinical trials on behalf of an assortment of biotech companies. There’s nothing to be afraid of, Mr. Asherson. Please get back into bed.”

Asherson’s hands came away from his face, and he looked Tom straight in the eye. “I was never in the SAS,” he whispered. “I was so *sure* ... but I’m a liar. I’m just a liar, too stupid to see through his own lies. I fooled myself. No one else—just myself. *Why?*”

The color seemed to have drained from the old man's previously florid face, and for a moment or two Tom was certain that his patient was about to faint. That certainty enabled him to take a step forward, anticipating that he might have to catch Asherson as he fell—but Asherson didn't fall. Instead, he moved, faster than anyone could have anticipated.

Asherson shoved Simon Phipps aside in order to clear a route to the door that wouldn't compel him to bowl over his daughter and Sarah Odiko. Tom had closed the door behind him when he'd come back with the second dose of LAW-1917, but Asherson seized the handle and twisted, then slammed the door back against the wall so hard that Tom heard the hinges splinter.

Asherson was already running down the corridor.

Tom grabbed hold of Simon Phipps to prevent him from falling over. “Look after Sarah and Mrs. Lockley,” Tom instructed him, tersely. “Shut the door. *Don't let anyone in until I come back.*” He didn't really expect to be obeyed, but he wanted to feel that he was still in control.

* * * *

Tom followed William Asherson, running as fast as he could. He knew that he wouldn't be able to outpace the old man unless and until they got to an open space where his strength and stamina would give him a clear advantage, but he figured that it was only a matter of time.

Asherson didn't head downstairs. Instead he went up—and then further up, toward the roof. The hospital building they were in, Tom knew, was seven stories high. If Asherson's intention was to hurl himself off the roof, he'd have no difficulty in finding a strip of bare concrete to aim at. There was no chance whatsoever of a man of his age surviving such a fall.

The door to the roof was locked, but Asherson smashed the lock. He was an old man, but he'd been teaching PE for most of his life. He still had powerful muscles, and he was possessed by the recklessness of absolute determination.

Tom couldn't latch the door behind him, but he was able to pull it to. Their chase had been observed and noted by half a hundred people, so someone would undoubtedly have notified security, but Tom was reasonably confident that anyone following him would be very discreet in opening the door to see what was happening, even if Simon Phipps wasn't there to explain. This was by no means the first time the hospital had had a potential jumper on the roof, and the procedure for trying to prevent a

jumper from taking the irrevocable step was almost as well known and well respected as the drug trial protocols.

Mercifully, Asherson was still sane enough to hesitate when he reached the parapet protecting the edge of the roof. He was still sane enough to look back at Tom. Tom was reassured to see that the old man now looked rueful, ashamed of his own stupidity

"I've made a mess of it, haven't I, doctor?" the old man said, in a surprisingly calm tone. "I thought I'd become so clever that I couldn't possibly make a mistake—but I guess that's something else the insulation's there to protect us from. It's not just the awful truth of our vile and vicious selves, but that ridiculous confidence in our own abilities, our own judgments. Who could have imagined that human nature was so *ridiculous*?"

"Actually," Tom said, leaving the customary ten foot gap between himself and the would-be jumper, "it's not that surprising—not to me, at any rate. You've had a bit of a shock, I know, but your very confusion should tell you that it's not a good idea to jump. Given time, you can certainly get through this. I need to keep you under observation, though. Whatever you intended to do, and whatever your motive was, the simple fact is that you've overdosed on a dangerous drug. We need to get you back to bed."

"I just threatened to kill your nurse, Dr. Wharton," Asherson said, bitterly. "I don't think going back to bed is going to set the matter to rest."

"Nobody knows about that but you, me, Simon, Patricia, and Sarah," Tom told him. "If you can speak for Patricia, I can speak for the others. Nobody will make a complaint. You were under the influence of a powerful psychotropic substance. Nobody will hold it against you. It won't even go into your patient notes. You're hypersensitive to an experimental drug, and you had a bad reaction. It's no big deal. Nobody's been hurt."

"*Nobody's been hurt!*" Asherson repeated, his voice somewhere between a hiss and a shriek. "You don't know, Dr. Wharton—you really don't."

Asherson set one foot on the parapet, as if the probability of his taking the decision to jump had been increased rather than decreased by Tom's attempted reassurance. He also looked over the edge to measure the drop, though, and reflexive vertigo froze his limbs in position. Tom shivered as a slight gust of wind chilled his face. The sky was overcast and rain

seemed likely to start falling at any moment. That would doubtless discourage Asherson from staying too long on the roof, but Tom had no idea how it would affect the probability of his taking the quicker route down.

"I mean that no one's been physically injured," Tom said. "Nobody needs to be, if you'll just step away from the edge."

"I'm still thinking about it," Asherson told him. "Still weighing it up. I'm seventy-five years old, doctor, and I have Alzheimer's. You say that I had a bad reaction to an experimental drug, but that's a lie. You're not a fool—you know what really happened."

"No, I don't," Tom told him, "and neither do you. I realize that the effect must have seemed entirely beneficial to you, at first, when you got your memory back and discovered an ability to think that you'd never had before—but you still made mistakes, didn't you? You were still confused about certain things. There's always a downside to these dramatic effects, Mr. Asherson. We need to figure out what it is—and by *we* I mean both of us. You need to understand what happened, if you're to go forward from here, but the important thing is that you *can* go forward. The overwhelming probability is that you're not going to lose what you've gained, and I can certainly help you cope with whatever panicked you into thinking that you couldn't go on."

"You'll need more than vague promises, Dr. Wharton," Asherson retorted. "I'm going to need you to put together a sound scientific argument for me, with all the evidence in place and every logical step filled in. That's what you demanded from me, remember?"

"Did I get it?" Tom countered.

"No," Asherson conceded. "But you haven't got an alternative. You haven't got anyone to hold hostage instead, have you?"

"I wouldn't do that," Tom told him, "even if there seemed to be no other way. As it happens, though, there is another way. I'll give you your sound scientific argument—with every i dotted and every t crossed, with logic so inexorable that you'll *have* to agree not to jump—if you'll tell me why you were so utterly determined to have that second dose, even though you couldn't find an argument of that sort to support your case."

"I think you've got your incentives a little confused," Asherson told him. "And I suspect that you're just spinning this out—keeping me talking at any cost."

"Maybe," Tom conceded, hugging himself as another gust of wind chilled him. "But you do want to hear my argument, don't you? And I certainly want to hear yours."

Asherson, who didn't seem to be feeling the wind's effects at all, shrugged his shoulders. His limbs weren't rigid any more, but he hadn't looked down again. That seemed to Tom to be a good sign. "I haven't got much to trade," the old man confessed, a trifle shamefacedly. "My reasons weren't scientific at all. They were personal, and stupid. I was convinced—*convinced*, mind—that I needed an extra dose to clear away the residual confusion, to cut through the veil of uncertainty. There were other things, but the kicker was that I was so sure I'd been in the SAS. I *knew* that if only I could clarify my memory, I'd have every last detail at my beck and call, to prove it to myself and everyone else."

"But you weren't in the SAS," Tom supplied. "You were a secondary schoolteacher for your entire working life, once you'd completed your National Service. All the second dose revealed to you was the extent of your own self-delusion."

"*All?*" Asherson repeated. "*All* it revealed. Oh, if only you knew, Dr. Wharton—if only you knew."

"So tell me," Tom said.

"Don't be an idiot," Asherson retorted. "If I've spent an entire lifetime hiding it from myself, because I couldn't even tolerate *me* knowing, I'm hardly going to spill it all to you, am I? Don't give me any of that crap about confession being good for the soul, or the necessity of recovering our repressed memories so that we can deal with them. *Deal* with them! Why do you think God gave us the protein whose miraculous dissolution is enabled by your precious LAW-1917? Because life would be unbearable if we *couldn't* cover things up. It ensures that all we can remember is the *fact* and not the *event*, and sometimes not even that. Well, I remember now, doctor. I remember everything—and I really do have to go, doctor. I really do have to get out of here, to see a man about a scythe."

"Sick sick sick," Tom quoted.

That struck a nerve. Asherson straightened up—but he didn't step back from the parapet. If anything, he seemed even more inclined to jump—but he was curious, and while he was curious he wasn't going to do anything stupid.

"Have I been saying that out loud?" Asherson asked. "I've been repeating it internally all my life, without even knowing what it meant. You'd be astonished by the number of subtle everyday sounds that repeat in threes. You probably don't notice them at all—but I do. And to me, they don't say *tick tick tick* or *cluck cluck cluck*. They say *sick sick sick*, even when I slur them into *six six six*—which isn't really much less ominous, is it? I never said it aloud—not, at any rate, until I began to lose my mind and couldn't keep it in any longer—but it's always been there, eating away at me, *judging* me, for as long as I can remember ... well, almost. I don't think I hated myself quite so much *before*...."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Mr. Asherson," Tom said, softly.

"Of course you don't. If you did, I'd have to kill you—or myself. If I gave you the explanation you want, you see, I'd *have* to kill myself. I might anyway, simply because *I* know what I mean. Purely as a matter of interest, though, do you have any medication that can undo what LAW-1917 has done to me? Could you put the muffler back, if I decided not to go?"

"Of course I have," Tom assured him. "The methods might be a trifle crude, but they'd do the trick. Thorazine would probably take care of it in the short term. If the protein doesn't begin to regenerate naturally, we may have to improvise a little, but we'll work our way through it. You'll be in far better shape when we do than you were the day before yesterday. You'll be back to your *real* old self—the one without Alzheimer's."

"Promises, promises," Asherson said. "Sorry, Dr. Wharton—I don't believe a word of it."

"That's a coincidence," Tom said. "I don't believe you, either. I don't believe it can be half as unbearable as you pretend it is merely to discover the truth about yourself. A bit of a shock, maybe—a reflexive paroxysm of humiliation—but not unbearable. And I don't mean to imply that I can't believe you've never done anything terrible. What I mean is that even if you were Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot, with millions of deaths on your conscience and countless instances of torture against your account, I don't believe that mere self-confrontation would be enough to deliver you irredeemably into Hell."

"And yet," Asherson retorted, "God or natural selection gave us that protein to spare us all the necessity. Are you really so sure, Dr. Wharton,

that you could bear to remember all your own follies and evil deeds?"

"Pretty sure," Tom said. "And that's not unjust hot air, Bill—I certainly intend to try. Now I've seen what LAW-1917 can really do, I'll have to try it."

"I wish you the best of luck," said Asherson, steeling himself to look over the parapet at the long drop to the parking lot for a second time. This time, he maintained his composure and didn't freeze up. "Maybe it won't work on you," he added. "Maybe I was uniquely unlucky."

"Nobody's unique," Tom told him, taking a precautionary step forward. "Especially not in the matter of unluckiness. Okay—forget the deal I offered you earlier. I'll go first. I'll give you the sound scientific reason why you can't possibly jump. I'll *prove* to you, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that you can't jump. Okay?"

"You don't need my permission," Asherson said. "Go right ahead. Why can't I jump, now that my head's finally clear?"

"Because this isn't about you. This isn't about whatever it is you remembered you did, or how horrible it made you feel. All that's pretty much irrelevant. This is about the trial. You stopped being William Asherson when your daughter signed that release form, and you became Patient K. You might think you resigned from the trial when you forced me to give you that second dose, and it's true that you'll have to be eliminated from the Phase One sample, but that doesn't nullify the trial. The trial has to go on—and we both know, now, exactly how much hangs on its results. We both know that we need to understand exactly what LAW-1917 does, and how. Even if it is a ticket to Hell—*especially* if it's a ticket to Hell—we need to know what it does and how to control what it does. The trial isn't over, Mr. Asherson—it's hardly begun. Phase One can still continue, especially if what happened in that room downstairs is carefully omitted from my research notes. There's only one thing that could stop Phase One in its tracks and bring investigation of LAW-1917 to an abrupt halt, Mr. Asherson. That will happen if, and only if, you actually jump off that parapet. That's why you can't do it—because this is *not about you*. It's about LAW-1917. It's about the trial. It's about *science*. You cannot jump off that parapet, Mr. Asherson, because the trial needs you to step back. You're a teacher—you understand that."

"I understand how little it means to be a teacher," Asherson said, bitterly. "I understand that I could never pay it back, never redeem myself,

if I'd worked for a thousand years instead of forty. I understand what really matters—I think, in a way, the Alzheimer's did that for me. Even before I got my memory back, it had forced me to zero in on the one thing I ever did that made me what I am, and destroyed any hope I ever had of being a good man."

"Think about what you just said, Mr. Asherson," Tom said, softly. "It was the Alzheimer's that got you hung up on something, and blew it up out of all proportion. When you suddenly got your memory and calculative ability back, it was still blown out of all proportion—but it won't stay that way. All you have to do is give it time, and you'll get your equilibrium back. I can't imagine what kind of shock you got when all those layers of repression were stripped away and you were able to remember all the horrid things you'd contrived to forget that you ever did, but I do know that you can see the force of my argument. I know that you know exactly what I mean when I say that this about the trial, not you—about science, not your past sins. You can't jump, Mr. Asherson. You simply cannot jump, no matter how much you hate whatever it is you did while you were on National Service in 1949."

"It was 1950," Asherson retorted, quietly and rather ominously. "How much more have you figured out?"

"Nothing much," Tom admitted. "I assume that there must have been an officer involved—someone who went to Sandhurst. And something that made a triple ticking noise. My guess is that those are just incidentals, though—trivia gathered in by association, which have come to stand in place of the event itself, helping to mask it even while they provided incessant reminders of it. You haven't said a word about the thing itself. The muffler was still in place, with regard to your speech, even when the Alzheimer's took hold. All you could do was beat around the bush. I still don't believe that it was as bad as you think, but that really doesn't matter. As a biology teacher, you must understand that what's important is discovering exactly what LAW-1917 does. The trial has to go on."

"There was no trial," Asherson whispered. "There should have been, but there wasn't. That Sandhurst idiot just let it go, as if it had never happened. He judged us, though—he sure as hell judged us. The way he looked ... just stood there, silently, with that stupid bloody ceiling-fan going *sick, sick, sick*. Not really, of course—it was just a noise, just a

wordless noise. But that's the way I heard it, and that's the way I've heard every noise like it, ever since, without ever knowing why."

"Please come with me, Mr. Asherson," Tom said. "Just give yourself a little time. I can medicate it, if you'll let me."

"All those years," Asherson continued, having drifted into a reverie again. "Why did I tell the poor little sod that I'd been in the SAS? Why? Why couldn't I tell him that I'd helped to educate ten thousand students? Why couldn't I tell him something true? Why did I have to make up such a stupid, stinking *lie*? Sergeant-Major! I should have been ashamed to be a bloody corporal! How could I do that, Dr. Wharton?"

The fact that the question had been asked told Tom that he had won, even though he didn't know the answer to it. "I don't know," he said, truthfully, "I could probably help you to find out, if I weren't going to be so busy, but I'm going to have one hell of a workload now that the trial's taken such an unexpected turn."

Asherson shook his head, and contrived the faintest smile imaginable. "You were right," he said, as if it were cause for wholehearted astonishment. "I can see that. Who'd have thought it?"

"I did," Tom reminded him. "Will you come back to your room now? I really need to start monitoring you properly. There are a lot of tests I ought to do. I need to know what's happening inside your head—biochemically, of course. You and I have so much work to do."

Asherson took his foot off the parapet, and came away. He went past Tom, ignoring the arm Tom extended by way of offering support, and headed back to the stairwell under his own steam. He paused, looking uncertainly at the broken door.

"It's okay," Tom assured him. "I'll get rid of them." He went to the door and held it slightly ajar. He instructed the people waiting behind it to clear the corridor and the staircases, and to go about their everyday business as though nothing had happened. He closed the door again, as best he could.

While they waited for that to happen, Asherson said, "I used to tell my kids—the ones I taught, that is, not *my* kids—that maintaining National Service after the war had been a terrible mistake. I told them that it had taught an entire generation of young men to lie, cheat, steal, and skive as a matter of pride as well as habit, and had instilled a lasting contempt for all authority. I didn't tell them the worst of it, though. I lied by omission."

"It was National Service," Tom told him. "It wasn't the Red Army marching through the ruins of Germany in 1945. It wasn't Auschwitz. Whatever you did, other people had done far, far worse only a few years earlier—and other people have done worse since."

Asherson reached out and put a gnarled hand on the doctor's shoulder, roughly forcing him to meet his eyes. "No, doctor," he said. "If it really is all about the trial, about science, that's something you need to understand. There isn't any excuse, and even if there were, *other people have done far worse* couldn't even begin to provide it. It's the other way around. Every sin, every crime, every evil deed, is an adequate damnation in itself. No matter what other people might have done, or how often, *your* action is *your* curse, and the thing that *you* cover up is the thing that *you* can't bear. You have to understand that, if you're going to put yourself on trial by taking LAW-1917. It won't be anywhere near as easy as you suppose. You have to understand what we'll be doing, if we carry this thing forward. If we take away the ability, or the right, that people have to blot out what we all need to blot out, the *physical* pain we'll remember all too clearly won't be the worst of it. Each of us lives his life like a cartoon character who's run off the edge of a cliff, but who's safe from falling as long as he doesn't realize it. You're right about it being about science, doctor, about the need to find out what this drug of yours can do—but you have to understand that it's not going to be an easy ride, by any stretch of the imagination."

Tom nodded his head sympathetically. "But now we know," he said, "we have to face up to it, don't we? However challenging its effects might be, we can't just forget that it ever existed, can we? Natural selection might have favored that solution, but we can't. We have to be strong enough to face the truth, if we're to count ourselves true human beings."

Asherson released Tom's shoulder, and nodded assent. Then he pulled himself together, hoisting his shoulders like a military man on parade or a PE teacher leading a class, ready for anything and determined to fulfil his purpose.

There was yet another gust of wind, this one carrying raindrops, which caused Tom to flinch as well as shiver. It made the ill-latched door vibrate, and the broken lock clicked three times in quick succession. After a slight pause, it did it again.

Tick tock tick, it seemed to be saying, non-judgmentally. *Tick tick tock*.

Tom suspected that William Asherson might not be hearing it in exactly the same way, but that didn't trouble him. After all, this wasn't about William Asherson, and never had been. This was about the trial—the petty trial that was already halfway through, and the greater trial that was about to begin.

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BULLET DANCE

BY John Schoffstall

John Schoffstall's stories have appeared in *Writers of the Future* Volume 21, *Strange Horizons*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. His current work in progress is a young adult novel about blasphemy, witch engineers, and goblins. In John's first tale for Asimov's SF, a young girl learns the brutal truth about why she must master the...

At night Shi and Morir came to Clio's room and taught her to bullet dance. Morir held a silvery Desert Eagle and sighted along its barrel at Clio. He wore a white linen suit and his black hair fell to his waist. Clio thought Morir had the most beautiful hair she had ever seen. It looked like her mother's hair in old photographs. Her mother was dead. For that matter, so was Morir, or at least, he was not alive in the usual sense. This didn't bother Clio, who, at seven years old, was untroubled by the rigid categories of the adult world.

"Watch Morir's face," Shi said. She bent so close to Clio that her robes half-enfolded the girl and her lavender scent enveloped them both. Shi pointed with a slender porcelain finger. "Just before he pulls the trigger, watch for the tiniest movement in his cheeks, and around his mouth. His eyes will narrow. His breathing will change. Observe closely. At the perfect moment you must begin to move, because the bullet is about to come."

The Desert Eagle roared and Clio leaped, but not fast enough. The bullet tore through her arm without hurting or leaving a mark because Morir used only ghost bullets. Someday, though, Shi said, Clio would have to dance with real bullets. For that day she must prepare.

Shi and Morir had come to her at night for as long as she could remember, back into that dim time in earliest childhood before memories form. In the beginning Morir's bullets came slowly, so slowly that she

could see them flying toward her, glittering gold or silver in the light of her bedside lamp. As her bullet dance improved, the bullets became faster, like real bullets. “No human being, no matter how skilled, can outdance a bullet,” Shi told her. “Instead, you must outdance the shooter.”

Shi taught Clio a song to chant in her head when she did the bullet dance, a song in a minor key with a strong beat. “It is the song of muscle and nerve,” Shi told her. “Human flesh can only move as fast as nerve and mind can command. When you sing this song, you align your own body to that rhythm. Your movements mirror your enemy's. You become his reflection, moving as he does. He cannot escape you, or trick you, any more than he could trick a mirror.”

When Clio talked to her father about the bullet dance he listened respectfully, as he did to everything she said. Her nanny, Najwa, was less indulgent. “You have a wonderful imagination,” she said, “but it is time to grow up. You will be in third grade next year, and it is time to put away childish things.” She and Clio sat at the breakfast table. Through the window Clio saw the morning sun glittering gold and silver off the Nile, the crawl of cars on the Al-Tahrir bridge, and the admonishing finger of Cairo Tower on Gezira Island.

“So soon?” Clio's father said. “Can't she be a child a little longer?”

Najwa clinked her tea cup on the saucer more loudly than necessary. “Perhaps you do things differently in America,” she said. Najwa had dark eyes, skin the color of a walnut shell, and dark hair that she kept bobbed. Najwa never wore a head covering, even on the street. That was because she was a Copt.

Clio's father always ate early and alone, sipping Nescafe while reading a fax version of the *Washington Post* and overnight dispatches from the State Department. He had stopped to spend a few minutes with Clio before going downstairs to his office on the fifth floor of the Embassy building.

“I think this may be her way of growing up,” Clio's father said. “Guns, bullets, death—she sees these things on television. She overhears adults talking. Goodness, she can't even leave the compound without passing by the Marines and their rifles. This fantasy is her way of coping with the madness of the adult world, and imagining she can control it. She'll grow out of it.”

“She would grow out of it faster,” Najwa said, “if she were properly encouraged to act and think like a young lady.”

* * * *

Two months later the embassy hosted a reception and dinner for a delegation of city officials and businessmen from New York City. New York was a sister city of Cairo, her father said. This time her father took Najwa's side: like it or not, Clio was going to attend. Najwa took her to buy a dress. Despite Clio's protests, it seemed her usual jeans or shorts would not do.

Clio and Najwa waited at the Embassy entrance in the noonday heat for a limo to be brought up from its underground garage. Debris and piles of construction material hid the small lawn in front of the embassy. A wrought iron fence covered with bougainvillea and red-orange trumpet vine had stood between the embassy grounds and the street. Now Egyptian workmen in coveralls were tearing it down and raising a ten-foot barrier of concrete slabs in its place. Crushed flowers were everywhere underfoot.

The air was acrid with dust from the construction, and Clio sneezed. "I liked it the old way," she said.

When the limo arrived, Najwa directed the driver to a shop that sold European and American brands, in one of the Baehler buildings on 26th July Street. Clio chose a long dress with a peach organza skirt and a black velvet bodice. "But I don't know if I can dance in this," Clio said. "It'll catch my legs."

"It's perfect for dancing," Najwa said.

She told the limo driver to return by way of Antikhana El Masriya Street, where there was a brasswork gallery. "The ambassador wanted you to give a little present to the Deputy Mayor of New York," she said. She always referred to Clio's father very respectfully, except in his presence, when often she seemed almost rude to him.

Little Fiats, big Mercedes buses, horse and donkey carts with rubber tires like automobiles, and the occasional camel thronged the jigsaw streets of the Sheikh al-Maarouf district. At the gallery, Najwa opened the front door. Chilly air from inside swept over Clio. "Hurry up," Najwa said. "What are you looking at?"

Cattycorner across the street, a ruined building filled most of the block. It was a three-story mansion in the old style, its façade decorated with fluted pilasters, corniced windows with tiny balustrades, and other fussy architectural bric-a-brac. The building might have been limestone or marble, but the stone was so covered with grime it was impossible to tell.

Most of its windows were broken. Some had been replaced with plywood. A group of idle men in soiled dishdasha robes lounged on the steps.

Clio heard the beat of the bullet dance song in her head.

Najwa tugged at her hand, but Clio refused to move. "Who lives there?" she asked.

"It's a pity they've let it go to ruin," Najwa said. "That was the palace of Prince Said Halim Pasha, back in the days when the Turks ruled Egypt."

"Does the prince live in it now?"

"Prince Said Halim has been dead for many years, child. The Armenians shot him. He was Grand Vizier to the Young Turks. They were all shot by Armenians."

The bullet song played in her head so loudly that Clio could barely hear the street noise. "Why didn't they dance?" she asked.

* * * *

That night Clio danced better than she ever had before, leaping and twirling around Morir's ghost bullets, dodging, twisting, doing somersaults and jetés. Not one bullet touched her. Shi clapped for her, a high, musical sound like china bells. "You dance with all your heart," she said.

Clio kept thinking of the prince who had been shot by Armenians. If Clio were shot by Armenians, would the Embassy building fall into ruin? What would happen to her father? That was why she danced so hard, so mindfully.

Adults taught Clio to do all sorts of things, to wear socks that matched, to pronounce "spaghetti" correctly, to use a fork instead of a spoon to eat peas. She was a dutiful child, but had begun to suspect that if she used a spoon instead of a fork to eat peas, the world would not fall down.

The bullet dance was different, or so it seemed. The bullet dance was important. Said Halim's ruined palace told her: this was what happened when people were shot.

The weight of a terrible responsibility descended on Clio.

One night Morir said, "The time has come for you to dance with real bullets. We will go to the Alyscamps." Shi took Clio's right hand in her own. Shi's hand was white, slick and chilly as a porcelain doll's. Morir took Clio's left hand. His hand was like dry twigs strung with cord. Across the nighttime world they ran, northward through the noisy streets of Cairo, through the bulrush bayous of the Nile delta, over the Mediterranean's black waves that tickled the bottoms of Clio's bare feet, across the rocky

hills of Sardinia, still warm from the sun, and high above the lights of Toulon and Marseilles. In a wood outside Arles the looted sarcophagi of fifteen centuries lay in stacks beside a broad gravel road: this was the Alyscamps. Tumble-down limestone sepulchers hid like the truant children of giants among the poplars and cypress. The night was moonlit, the moist air smelled of fallen cypress needles.

Clio danced among the tombs and the poplars, flinging her body high into the air above Morir's bullets as they ricocheted off the stacked marble sarcophagi. Once a bullet grazed her thigh. It tore a hole in her nightgown and left a red mark on her skin.

Morir's bullets had cut fresh chips out of the sides of the sarcophagi. Clio ran her fingers across them. She had loved the bullet dance, the beauty and rhythm of its movements, but tonight had been different. Her thigh stung where the bullet had grazed her. It was less beautiful when you might really be shot.

"Were all these people shot?" she asked, pointing to the sarcophagi and vaults about them.

Shi shook her head. "There have been no new burials here for five hundred years."

"Oh." Clio had wondered whether that might be why the place was such a ruin. "If I'm shot, will the Embassy fall down?"

"Sometimes," Shi said, "bad things happen when people die. Sometimes bad things happen when they don't die. Everyone must die at his proper time."

* * * *

At the reception for the New York City delegation, the embassy ballroom sparkled with light. A band played Egyptian folk tunes and current American pop hits. Clio danced with everyone, including her father, the Deputy Mayor of New York, the Egyptian Minister of Culture, and the son of the CEO of Citibank, who was named James. James was in fourth grade already. He wore a suit, but kept shrugging at the shoulders and pulling at his collar with one finger.

"You look very nice," Clio said. Najwa had told her to say that.

James said: "I didn't want to wear this. Dad made me. How can grown-ups wear suits all the time?"

"You're supposed to say, 'Thank you'," Clio said. "When someone says you look nice."

"You sound like a grown-up."

"Do not!"

"If I ever have kids," James said, "I won't forget what it was like to be a kid and have to do what people tell you."

"Me, too," Clio said quickly. But it crossed her mind that grown-ups, too, must have said the same to themselves when they were young. So why did they forget it when they grew up? Distracted by this thought, she almost missed what James said next.

"Aren't you scared with all the guns around here?" he asked.

"What guns?"

He pointed around the room. "There."

Marines in dress blues stood at parade rest in the corners of the room. Each wore a sidearm. James pointed to another man. "That man has a gun in a shoulder holster." It was one of the Secret Service agents who usually accompanied Clio's father.

Clio knew the Marines and Secret Service men had guns, but had never thought about what that might mean. Were the Marines the ones who were supposed to shoot at her, against whom she would have to bullet dance? "I'm not scared," she said. "I'm a good dancer."

"Huh? So what?"

"You dance around the bullets, that's all."

James stopped. "No one can do that," he said.

Clio hesitated. She was filled with a sudden stubbornness, and unwilling to retreat. She looked James in the eye. "I can dodge bullets," she said.

She recognized the look on James's face. She had jumped on his bed with muddy boots. "No, you can't!" he said.

"I can."

The twitch of his mouth. The tautness in his cheek. She knew these things. The bullet was coming.

"Then dodge this!" James said. He drew back his fist and struck at her face.

His eyes were uncertain, as if he wasn't in earnest, but intended to pull his punch. Clio didn't flinch. A spasm of annoyance crossed James's face. *Now it's for real*, Clio thought.

James launched himself toward her, both fists going. Clio leaped, her body flowing over him, somersaulting, landing on her feet as James

sprawled onto the dance floor.

The band had stopped playing. Adults were moving toward them. It would be over in a moment, but James, his cheeks scarlet, ran at her one last time. *This is easy*, Clio thought. She tried to leap again, but this time her legs caught in the fabric of her long dress. James grabbed her around the waist, and dragged her down to the floor with him. Pain seared her right shoulder and tears burned in her eyes. Warm and fleshy adult hands gently pulled them apart, and reproachful adult voices tut-tutted.

* * * *

In a tomb beneath Xi'an, Clio watched the Qin Emperor's terracotta army drilling in ranks and files, ten thousand ceramic horsemen and foot soldiers marching. Drummers beat time and flautists played the bullet dance song for her on seven-holed flutes carved from the ulnae of the red-crowned crane. "My shoulder still hurts," Clio said.

"It is dangerous to use a tool in a task for which it is not designed," Shi said. "Hand-to-hand fighting is different than bullet dancing."

"I want to learn to fight, then."

"There is no need," Shi said.

"Why do I have to learn to bullet dance?" Perhaps the pain in Clio's shoulder made her braver than usual: she was slightly shocked to find herself questioning an adult.

The ceramic feet of the Qin Emperor's army rattled on the limestone floor of the tomb like teeth chattering. "In school you learn arithmetic and reading," Shi said, "because your father and teachers think those subjects will prove of value some day. Exactly when, under what circumstances, they don't know. But they think that someday, that knowledge will be important.

"Like you in your bullet dance, we read the expressions which cross the face of history—Morir and I, and Tumba, and Sepulcrum, and Mauti, and others of our order. We know there is a bullet coming for you. Many bullets, perhaps. We do not know where, or when, but we know they must not hit you. We prepare you for that unknown moment."

Because Clio's shoulder still ached, there was no bullet dancing that night. Instead, hours of instruction on firearms engineering. Sear and tumbler, breach and chamber, cook-off and hangfire, the language of the clockwork of destruction.

"When do I learn to shoot a gun?" Clio asked.

* * * *

Shi and Morir exchanged glances.

"I want to learn," Clio said.

Shi and Morir didn't come again for several nights. Restless, Clio practiced alone in her room, humming the bullet dance song to herself while she leaped into the air and ducked imaginary bullets.

Someone loudly clapped their hands behind her, and she spun around, shocked.

"You're very athletic," said her father. She had left the door of her room cracked open, and he was looking around it. He said, "I had no idea. You leaped clean over that boy, the other night. Is that a dance they're teaching you at school?"

"Uh-uh," Clio said.

"Is it gymnastics?"

"...I guess."

"Did you make it up?"

"No."

He laughed, his brassy male laugh that both reassured her and made her feel shy at the same time. "All right, I'm embarrassing you. It's a secret, then. But I'll bet you'd be good at gymnastics. We should look into it. Maybe you can find a way to release all that energy without beating up your peers."

The American school in Cairo was small and its P.E. teacher knew only rudimentary gymnastics, but her father's secretary found an expatriate German who had once helped coach the East German Olympic team. Clio went to his gymnasium three times a week after school, in the embassy limousine. The first time she went, the driver refused to go without a Secret Service agent.

"Why?" Clio complained to her father. "Najwa and I go to the museums and the souks all the time. Last week we had tea at the Fishawi —"

"Not any more. New policy from CENTCOM. A Secret Service man has to go with you whenever you go into Cairo. It's the same for all embassy families."

"Whyyyyy?"

"Right now, there's a lot of tension in the region." He put an arm around her shoulder. "These situations come and go."

"When will it go?"

"I don't know, punkin. Maybe not in our lifetimes."

The walls were closing in.

Although the movements of classical gymnastics were not those of the bullet dance, Clio's body was well toned, and she learned quickly. Karl Dresdner was a man miserly with praise, but Clio recognized approval in his eyes and his pursed lips. Within six months she was being packed off on a British Air flight to Milan for a gymnastics meet against other overseas American schoolchildren. Six months later, at a pan-European/Americas meet in Marseilles, she took the bronze in her age class.

With Shi and Morir, Clio trained in the Sedlec Ossuary church in the Czech Republic, where the disinterred bones of forty thousand dead men cover the walls and ceiling and are joined to form fantastical crosses, coats of arms, and monstrosities.

She trained in the Valley of the Kings, four hundred miles up the Nile from Cairo, where sixty tombs are known to living men, and sixty more are not. In the echoing chambers of the dead, the mummies of priests, magicians, generals, and the sons of sons of kings shuffled up to Shi and Morir to pay their respects, their voices like fire through dry grass.

She trained in the Aokigahara woods of Yamanashi Prefecture, where bankrupt businessmen come to hang themselves from the pines. Mists gathered in the hollows of the forest; high over the trees the snow-covered cone of Mount Fuji shone in the moonlight. Foxes and feral dogs barked, deep in the forest. Shi fired a submachine gun. Its slugs chased Clio through the boxwoods and beneath the hemlocks, chewing into the mossy fallen tree trunks that covered the forest floor. Woodcocks, startled from their sleep, flew upward through the trees.

"Your bullet dance is perfect," Shi said when they were done. Clio was breathing heavily from exertion and her sweaty skin was just beginning to become uncomfortable in the chill of the night. "Come," Shi said. "Morir has work to do before we go."

They walked down a forest trail, then another that diverged from it, then another, until they were at the heart of the Aokigahara. Clio noticed that a man's body was hanging by the neck from a pine branch. It was dressed in a suit. As Clio watched, Morir floated up into the air a few feet and whispered in the hanging man's ear. Then he took the man's hand, and both descended. No, the man was still hanging. But he was also on the

ground, holding Morir's hand. His face was sad. Morir continued speaking to him for a minute longer before both walked off together into the dark forest.

Shi and Morir never came for her again.

* * * *

Years passed.

One day, returning to Cairo from a gymnastics meet in Marseilles, Clio heard the pilot announce shortly after take-off: "*La Sardaigne est sous nous. Gauche de l'avion.*" She looked out her window. Sardinia glowed green and buff against the dark Mediterranean. Clio could still remember the warmth of its sun-heated rocky hills against her feet when she ran with Shi and Morir.

Shi and Morir?

How long had it been? She had almost forgotten.

She had run across the Mediterranean with them? How was that possible? That couldn't have happened.

It was like waking up from a dream so vivid and compelling that it takes minutes, or even hours to fully convince oneself it isn't real. Clio's heart banged in her chest, and she felt short of breath. She stared at her lap, wondering whether everyone was looking at the crazy girl with fantastical imaginary friends. Her ears burned.

The bald man in the seat beside her sniffed, and turned the page of his *L'Express*. The flight attendant pushed her drink cart down the aisle. One of its wheels squeaked. Below, Sardinia slowly passed from view.

Clio relaxed back into her seat. She was safe. She needn't tell. No one need know her fantasies from years ago. She was thirteen years old. The adult world beckoned her, and adults do not have death gods as imaginary friends.

* * * *

Over the next two years Clio took a few more medals in international gymnastic competition, but realized she didn't want to pursue it further. That intensity of physical training and privation necessary to be an Olympian repelled her. "An Olympian must be her art," Herr Dresdner told her. "To excel at the highest level, you must exclude everything else from your life. You must eat, sleep, breathe, dream, be gymnastics."

Clio shook her head. "I like gymnastics, Karl," she said, "but I don't want to be gymnastics."

Her fellow gymnasts gossiped about injuries, about bulimia, about how a gymnast's career was over by age twenty. The way children were prepared to live in the adult world began to seem as cruel as Procrustes' bed or Chinese foot-binding: it stretched, chopped, and deformed children to fill adult roles and adult needs. Clio understood her bullet dance fantasy as an attempt to escape this fate, to pretend she could dodge the manipulation of adults and the perils of the world in which they lived. The world into which Clio, midway through adolescence, was rapidly and unstoppably being pulled.

Quitting gymnastics, though, produced a sort of cabin fever when she could no longer expect to fly off to Barcelona or Stockholm several times a year. Her father in his official capacity traveled frequently, however, and she often successfully begged him to let her come along, to Tel Aviv, to Riyadh, to Athens, to Rabat. To Davos.

* * * *

The Steigenberger Belvédère Hotel emerged from the slope of the mountainside behind it like a Vitruvian experiment in geometric form, blocky and Swiss, surmounted by a leaden mansard roof. Clio's father and a few of his staff had come to Davos for the yearly World Economic Forum. Soldiers and police stood on every corner. Armored vehicles blocked off many streets.

Even at nine o'clock at night, Promenade Strasse burned with light: street lamps reflected off the snowy road and the snow-covered Mercedes and Audis parked on its southern shoulder. Brightly lit shop windows and cafés beckoned.

Floodlights lit the front of the Steigenberger Belvédère. A colonnade framed the lobby door. Wide fluted pilasters with square capitals divided the building's façade. Clio thought the building beautiful, and reassuring.

She began to hum a melody, one she hadn't thought of in years. She wrapped her scarf around her neck and over her mouth against the January wind. Memory danced at the edge of her thoughts, tantalizingly close. What was she trying to remember? In her imagination she saw the Steigenberger Belvédère ruined, its windows broken, its roof collapsed, its white stucco crumbling off the bricks beneath. She caught her breath.

Turning away from the hotel, she crossed Promenade Strasse, her boots crunching on the street's packed snow. Nighttime lights twinkled in Davos

Platz in the valley below. She hummed, and her right foot tapped in time with the music.

"Clio?"

She turned. It was a boy about her own age, whose face she didn't immediately recognize. A rubber band held his hair in a stubby ponytail. He was trying for a soul patch, but didn't quite have the beard to make it convincing.

"Hi," he said. "You probably don't remember me. James? I met you when my dad and I went to Cairo a few years ago. My dad just ran into your dad at the hotel and he said you were here." James's cheeks and nose were reddened by the cold. "I wanted to apologize to you. For, you know."

"You already did. After it happened," Clio said.

"Yeah, but ... that was because Dad told me to. I was still mad at you. But I've been really embarrassed since then, whenever I think about it. So, I'm sorry."

They exchanged stories. James prepped at Phillips Academy. He was second string on the lacrosse team, played keyboards, and did martial arts. "One thing I wanted to ask you," he said, "was, what school was that? That thing you did, dodging punches."

"School?"

"Yeah, what fighting school? It was pretty fly."

"It was ... just something I made up," Clio said. It was the bullet dance song she had been humming, she realized.

"Really?"

"Maybe I saw it on TV."

James shook his head. "Look, if you don't want to tell me, it's okay, but —"

Imaginary death gods taught me.

"—I'd really like you to teach it to me. If you want to."

"It was a joke," Clio said. "There's nothing to teach."

James's nostrils flared. The muscles in his temples tightened. The bullet dance song chanted so loudly Clio could barely hear James's words. Her feet wanted to move. The bullet was coming.

James's fist lashed out. Clio didn't move. The blow stopped, millimeters from her face.

"You see? You see?" James was triumphant. "You knew I was going to hit you, and you knew it was a feint."

"You're still a moron," Clio said.

She expected him to strike at her again, as he had in the ballroom years ago. Instead, his gaze fell away, and he stared across the valley at the lights of Davos Platz. "Yeah. Yeah, I am. But if I could do that stuff, I wouldn't hide it. I'd be proud of it."

She tried to parse out the feelings in his voice. Resentment? Envy? Admiration? Or all together? For the first time, though, Clio believed he was sincere, and was touched.

"All right," she said. "I'll teach you a little."

* * * *

Clio couldn't sleep that night. She hadn't thought of Shi and Morir in years. She hadn't sung the bullet dance song in years. She had dismissed all that as daydreams, like imagining you were a bride, or an equestrienne.

The bedcovers were too hot and too heavy, and she threw them back. In the other bed, her father grunted and rolled over. How was it possible for her to dodge a blow? When had she learned to do that? She had been able to teach James only a tiny fraction of her art. She was astonished by the depth and subtlety of what she knew, scarcely realizing she knew it.

All the places Shi and Morir had taken her, she might have seen in books or on television, and worked into a fantasy. Hadn't the Brontë sisters, as children, created vast imaginary worlds? Didn't everyone do that? But everyone could not dodge blows.

She got out of bed. Humming the bullet dance song under her breath, she danced in the hotel room in near-darkness broken only by a slash of light from beneath the door. Somersaulting and twisting, bounding over her bed, she danced in her pajamas, danced to understand whether her dance was real, or made-up, or whether that made any difference.

Her father stirred in his sleep, and Clio stopped. He grunted and rolled over, but didn't wake.

She got her cell phone from her luggage and went into the bathroom. She dialed. Ringing, interminable. She prayed his father wouldn't answer.

James's voice: "Yeah? Who—?"

"It's Clio. We're going to Arles."

* * * *

A Eurostar coach brought them to Paris by mid-afternoon, and the TGV Paris Sud-Est to Avignon by midnight. In the Gare d'Avignon station they spent a restless night trying to sleep, Clio's head cushioned on a

rolled-up sweater against James's shoulder. A commuter train brought them to Arles by eight AM. They took a bus to the Alysamps.

It had snowed a few days before. Although the road was mostly clear, tatters of snow still lay beneath the stands of cypress, and cupped in shadowed corners inside the empty sarcophagi. Despite the cold, a few sightseers wandered down the road and gathered at the door of the chapel of Saint Honorat. Clio could hear their voices and laughter.

She walked down the gravel road, letting her fingertips brush the tops of the stones. James tagged behind until she took his hand and brought him even with her. Gray-green lichen grew over the granite sarcophagi, but on the ones of marble or limestone, the lichen was red-orange, like splatters of dried blood. The January sun barely cleared the trees, glittering gold and silver through the bare branches. Their spidery shadows chilled Clio as she walked beneath them.

Had she really been here? Or had she just seen photographs of this place in books? She knelt to examine one sarcophagus. There were groups of pockmarks in the limestone, where the lichen had been knocked off and was just beginning to grow back, and the stone beneath had been chipped. Clio pulled off her gloves and ran her fingers over the chipped stone, letting the cold soak into her fingertips. Her heart beat fast. She pressed her fingers so hard into the rough stone that they hurt, as if the stone spelled out a message that she could read, if only she tried hard enough.

"Finding what you're looking for?" James asked.

Clio stood up and brushed twigs from her coat. "Almost," she said. She put an arm around his waist and pressed his cheek with the tips of her fingers. He hadn't wanted to wear a suit, she remembered. Long ago. She reached around his head and flicked his absurd little pony tail. "How does your dad like this?" she asked.

"He's not crazy about it."

She stood on tiptoe, put her mouth against James's, and kissed him hard, pulling his head down to hers. She thrust her tongue into his mouth, because she thought that was something her own father probably wouldn't be crazy about, either.

* * * *

A month after Clio returned to Cairo, the number of Marine guards at the gate doubled. Her father now carried a Glock 18 in a shoulder holster. The Embassy held emergency drills weekly. Clio became accustomed to

being roused out of bed in the middle of the night and stumbling down the stairs to the hardened shelter in the building's basement.

"Are we in danger?" Clio asked him.

Her father grunted, "Things aren't getting better."

Only in the past year had his hair become very gray at the temples, and his face deeply lined. Or hadn't she noticed these things before?

"I want to learn to shoot a gun," Clio said.

"In heaven's name, why?"

"So the embassy won't fall down."

At first her father didn't take her wish any more seriously than Shi and Morir had, but he was here for her to wheedle every day, and they were not. Eventually he gave in, and Clio began taking shooting lessons from a Marine sharpshooter, firing a .22 pistol at the range in the Embassy basement.

She missed Najwa. Najwa's cousins and uncle had owned a clothing shop. When it was destroyed by a mob stirred up by a radical imam, they had emigrated to New South Wales, where they had relatives, and Najwa had gone with them. Some of Clio's classmates from the American school had been sent back to the States. Clio's father had begun to talk about sending Clio to stay with her grandparents in California.

"I'm safe here," she'd told him.

"I'd like to believe that," her father said, "but—"

"I'm safe anywhere."

"Oh, to be as young, and as certain as you!"

It was nearing Clio's bedtime one night. She sat in the apartment's living room in pajamas and robe, doing her homework while her father read a book. Thunder rumbled. It sounded like thunder.

A minute later the phone rang. Clio's father picked it up. He spoke a few curt syllables before putting the receiver down. He rose from his chair and grabbed Clio by the arm. "Ow, that hurts," Clio said.

Her father's gun was in his hand. "There's been an incursion past the perimeter," he said. "It was a car bomb. Some Marines were killed. There may be hostiles about. We'll go down to the shelter until the all-clear." Clio nodded. She was closest to the hall door, and reached for the knob.

"Wait," her father said, right behind her, "I'll go—"

The roar of automatic weapons fire outside. The door splintered, bits of wood and paint chips spalling off. It sprang open. A man wearing a

kaffiyeh wrapped around his face stood in the doorway. He held an Uzi.

The bullet dance music sang in Clio's body, sang of the unity of flesh and nerve and thought and desire.

The gunman fired. Clio leaped. The bullets passed harmlessly under the flowing arc of her body like water beneath the span of a bridge. Her father was behind her, and the bullets struck him full in the chest. He groaned, and his body fell to the floor.

Rage filled Clio. Tears escaped from her eyes. The gunman swung his Uzi toward her, but Clio cartwheeled away across the floor, the bullets chasing her futilely, thumping into the carpet. She leaped into the air, pushed off against the wall, bounded off a sofa, and then she was upon the gunman. Her heel struck his temple and knocked him to the floor. He dropped the Uzi.

Now what?

The man she had kicked grunted in pain, but half rose and scrambled across the floor to retrieve his gun.

How long could she dance?

Her father's Glock 18 had fallen from his hand when he'd gone down. Clio picked it up and thumbed the mode selector to full auto. Music sang inside her, ascending to a crescendo of despair and resolve.

The gunman picked up his Uzi and turned toward Clio. She trained the Glock on him, and squeezed the trigger.

The Glock roared and emptied its magazine into the gunman's chest. Flame erupted from the compensator slots. Ejected brass sailed up over Clio's right shoulder, the shells ringing as they struck the wall behind her. The recoil knocked her backward onto the carpet. The echoes of the gun's discharge faded, but Clio's ears still rang. She dropped the Glock and burst into tears.

Sobs as painful as blows wracked her chest. She pushed herself up on her hands, and stumbled across the floor to where her father lay. Blood, everywhere. She knelt and grabbed his shoulders, her fists knotting the blood-soaked fabric, warm crimson rivulets oozing out between her fingers. She shook him as hard as she could. "Dad! Dad! Father!" His eyes stared upward.

The world was blurry. There were other figures moving in the room. The Marines had come too late, she thought. Then she saw it wasn't the Marines.

Morir bent over her father. Clio wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robe. Shi said to her, "Your bullet dance was perfect."

"But my father is dead!" Clio screamed at her. "It doesn't matter!"

Shi knelt beside her. "Sorrow is the bullet you cannot dodge," she said. "Dear, your father was supposed to die."

We know there is a bullet coming toward you, Shi had said to her long ago. *We know it must not hit you.*

It took a moment, and a lifetime, for the meaning of that to sink in.

"It wasn't for me," Clio said at last. "None of it was for me."

"All of it was for you," Shi said. Morir lifted her father up by the hand, although his body still lay on the floor. "You must take your father's place in the mechanism of the world. That is the fate of children."

Clio reached for her father's hand, but already he was out of her reach, walking away with Morir into the darkness.

"You're like every other grown-up," Clio said. Her lips felt thick, and her words were slurred. "Damn you, you're just like everyone else."

Shi nodded. "As you, too, will be some day."

"Never," Clio said. "Never. I will never treat a child like you treated me." Her anger dried her tears. She stood up. Her hands, still sticky with her father's blood, clenched into fists. "Never. Never," she said, knowing that she lied. "Never," she said, as if her anger could make her words and intentions true, because the ugly and necessary truth could not be borne. "Never. Never. Never."

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THE SKY IS LARGE AND THE EARTH IS SMALL

by Chris Roberson

Chris Roberson's new story is set in his Celestial Empire sequence. This series features an alternate history in which China rose to world domination. Other works from that milieu include "Red Hands, Black Hands" (Asimov's SF, December 2004), The Voyage

of *Night Shining White*, (PS Publishing, 2007), the forthcoming *Dragon's Nine Sons* from Solaris Books, and his YA novel, *Iron Jaw & Hummingbird*, from Viking.

Water-Dragon year, twenty-eighth year of the Kangxi emperor

Cao Wen stood south of the Eastern Peace Gate of the Forbidden City, facing the entrance to the Eastern Depot. It was an unassuming building, dwarfed by the grandeur of the buildings on the opposite side of the concourse—the Six Ministries, the Court of State Ceremonial, and the Directorate of Astronomy, where the imperial astronomers studied the heavens, watchful of any signs or portents which might auger good or ill for the emperor. Only the Office of Transmission was less grand than the Eastern Depot, its function largely eliminated when the emperor had instituted the palace memorial system, requiring that each of his ministers and deputies communicate their reports to him directly in their own hand, for his eyes only.

At the Eastern Depot's large, unadorned entrance, two guards stood at the ready, sabers sheathed at their sides, poleaxes in their hands. Cao displayed his signs of authority, which marked him as an authorized representative of the Ministry of War. One of the guards studied the papers closely, then turned and motioned for Cao to accompany him, leaving the other at his post.

Following the guard into the main hall of the Eastern Depot, Cao's eyes lit upon a plaque, on which a motto was engraved in simply crafted characters: "Heart and Bowels of the Court."

"Please wait here," the guard said with an abbreviated bow, "while this one fetches a superior." Then, Cao's papers still in hand, the guard disappeared through one of the many arches leading from the main hall.

Cao waited in silence as agents of the Eastern Depot came and went, all about the emperor's business. Most were clad in plain gray robes and would not merit a second glance were he to pass them on the street. Only a few wore the elaborate mantles that gave the emperor's secret police their name—the Embroidered Guard.

After a few long moments, the guard reappeared, with an older man following close behind. In his simple cotton robes, this newcomer could have easily passed for a fishmonger or merchant in textiles, thin wisps of mustaches drooping over his thick lips, his eyes half-lidded as though he were just waking from a long slumber. His face, frame, and hands

displayed the softened edges that suggested he was a eunuch, one who had traded in his manhood for a life of imperial service.

"Return to your post," the older man said to the guard, who replied only with a rigid nod.

"You are Cao Wen?" the man said to him, without preamble.

Cao allowed that he was, and bowed lower than the man's appearance would suggest was required. In such a setting, appearances could be deceiving.

"I am Director Fei Ren of the Eastern Depot." The man brandished the papers Cao had brought with him, which bore the chop of the Minister of War. "I understand you wish to speak with one of our guests?"

"Yes, O Honorable Director," Cao said, bowing again, lower this time, "it is the wish of his excellency the Minister of War that I should do so. It is believed that your ... guest ... has some intelligence that may be of use to the emperor, may-he-reign-ten-thousand-years."

"This individual has been temporarily housed with us for some considerable time," Director Fei answered. "Since before our emperor reached his age of majority. And not all that time spent in the Outside Depot, but some months and years in the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing, as well."

Cao concealed a shudder. He had heard only whispered rumors about what went on in the private chambers of the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing, which the Embroidered Guard used to elicit confessions from the most recalcitrant suspects.

Director Fei continued. "Any intelligence this individual had to offer has long since been documented, I would venture to say. And had we been able to extract a confession from him on his many crimes, he would long ago have gone under the executioner's blade. I think you will find this one a spent fruit, all juices long since dried up, leaving nothing more than a desiccated husk of a man."

"You are obviously much wiser in such matters than I, Honorable Director," Cao said, with the appropriate tone of humility, "but such is my office to fulfill, and it would displease my master the Minister of War if I were to shirk my responsibility."

Director Fei shrugged. "Very well. It is your own time that you waste. Come along and I will have one of my agents escort you into the Outside Depot."

Director Fei waved over another man dressed in plain robes, this one nearer Cao's own age of twenty years.

"Agent Gu Xuesen will escort you, Cao Wen. Now you must excuse me, as more pressing matters demand my attention."

Cao bowed low, and Director Fei disappeared back into the shadows beyond the main hall.

"This way, sir," Gu said, inclining his head, and started toward one of the larger arches.

Agent Gu led Cao through the winding labyrinth of passages within the Eastern Depot. The building was larger than its exterior would suggest, due to the snaking passages, numerous small chambers, and rooms inside. Frequently passages opened onto open-air courtyards, and just as frequently onto dank chambers that had never seen the light of day. As they went, Agent Gu provided the name and use of each chamber and room.

Cao was surprised to find so talkative a member of the Embroidered Guard, who were widely known as a circumspect—some might even say taciturn—lot. When Agent Gu explained that he was only in his first years with the Embroidered Guard, and that he was required to complete his long years of training before being allowed to go beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot, his talkative manner became much more understandable. He clearly hungered for dialogue with someone nearer his own age, and while his training likely prohibited providing information when it was unnecessary and when there was no advantage to be gained, his youthful hunger for distraction, in this instance at least, was getting the better of his discretion.

"And now, Cao Wen," Agent Gu was saying, "we pass into that section known as the Inside Depot. This is the place used to house the most dangerous and serious suspects brought in by the Embroidered Guard. It is the most closely guarded of all the sections of the Eastern Depot, and none who are not of the Embroidered Guard may enter unescorted."

They passed by a tall doorway, the door lacquered matte black, the frame painted a red the color of blood.

"And beyond this point," Gu said, pointing to the door, "rests the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing."

Cao flinched, despite himself. He labored not to call to mind the stories he had heard of the Bureau.

“Even through the reinforced walls and doors of the Bureau,” Gu went on, “which have been designed to dampen sound, screams and hideous wailing can occasionally be heard.”

They passed by the jet-and-scarlet doorway, turning a corner to a long corridor, and Cao tried to put the door and what lay beyond it out of his thoughts.

Continuing on, they came at last to a broad, open-air courtyard, surrounded on all sides by narrow doorways leading to small chambers. Men and women milled around in the bright morning sun, shuffling under the gaze of guards who perched atop towers positioned on the opposite sides of the courtyard, surmounted by banners on tall posts.

“This, finally, is the Outside Depot,” Gu explained, “in which guests of the Embroidered Guard are temporarily housed. Some have confessed to minor crimes which merit no more severe punishment than imprisonment, while others await the decision of the emperor on their final sentencing. Some few have yet to confess, but have been deemed by the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing as not likely to confess at any point in the future. As no conviction can be achieved without a confession, these few are returned to the Outside Depot, assuming they are not violent enough to merit imprisonment in the Inside Depot, to wait.”

“Wait for what?” Cao asked, casting his gaze across the dispirited faces before him.

“Some wait for a reprieve from the emperor, some wait for further evidence to come to light, while some just wait. For death to take them, one supposes.”

Agent Gu pointed to an ancient man sitting at the center of the courtyard, his legs folded under him, his full attention on the passage across the ground of the shadows of the two towers.

“That is the man you seek,” Agent Gu said. “That is Ling Xuan.”

* * * *

Cao Wen sat opposite the ancient man in the interview chamber. Agent Gu waited beyond the door of iron-clad hardwood, which Cao doubted any sound could penetrate, short of a full-bodied bellow.

Cao had a sheaf of papers in front of him, while the old man sat with his shoulders slumped, his hands folded in his lap and the slack-jawed smile of an imbecile on his wrinkled face.

“Ling Xuan?” Cao repeated. The old man's eyes rested on the simple wooden table between them, worn smooth by generations of hands. Cao could not help but wonder what other dialogues had played out across the table, over the long years since the Embroidered Guard was established in the days of the Yongle emperor, during the Bright Dynasty.

Still, though, the old man did not reply.

“Is that your name?”

The old man drew in a deep breath through his nostrils, blinked several times, and straightened up, all without lifting his eyes from the surface of the table. When he spoke, his voice was soft but with an underlying strength.

“The swirls and curves of the wood from which this table is constructed call to mind the heavens and clouds picked out in golden thread on the longpao dragon robes I wore in the service of the Shunzhi emperor. Strange to think that they follow me, here, after all of these long years. Perhaps they seek to remind me of days past, when my circumstances were more auspicious.”

The man had spoken slowly, without any pause between words, a single, breathless oration.

Cao looked at the table, and saw nothing but meaningless swirls and knots. Was the old man mad, and his search already proven to be in vain?

“Need I remind you,” Cao replied, his tone moderated but forceful, “that I come here on the authority of the Minister of War, who speaks with the voice of the Dragon Throne itself? Now, I ask again, is your name...”

“Yes,” the old man said, not raising his eyes. “Ling Xuan is my name.”

Cao nodded, sharply. “Good. And are you the same Ling Xuan who is listed here?”

Cao slid a piece of paper across the table, a copy he had recently made of the fragmentary inventory of the imperial archives of the Chongzhen emperor, one of the last of the Bright Dynasty, who ruled before the Manchu came down from the north and established the Clear Dynasty.

On the inventory was highlighted one item: *A Narrative Of A Journey Into The East, To The Lands Which Lie Across The Ocean, With Particular Attention to the Mexica, by Ling Xuan, Provincial Graduate.*

Ling looked at the paper for a long time, as though puzzling out a complex mathematical equation in his head. After a long moment he

spoke, his voice the sound of distant thunder. "Such a long time ago." And then he fell silent once more.

After a lengthy silence, the old man nodded, slowly, and raised his eyes to meet Cao's.

"Yes," Ling said. "I am he."

"Good," Cao said impatiently. "Now, I am sorry to report that all that is known about your account is the title, as it was among those records lost in the transition of power from the Bright Dynasty to the Clear. My purpose for coming here to interview you is..."

"Such a long time ago, but I can remember it all, as though it were yesterday."

Cao paused, waiting to see if the old man would speak further after his interruption. When Ling remained silent, Cao nodded again and continued, "That is good, because..."

"When we are young," Ling said, the distant thunder growing somewhat closer, "the days crawl by. I remember summers of my youth which seemed to last for generations. But as we grow older, the months and years flit by like dragonflies, one after another in their dozens. But by the calendar, a day is still a day, is it not? Why is it, do you suppose, that the duration of a span of time should seem so different to us in one circumstance than another?"

Cao shuffled the papers before him, impatiently. "I'm sure that I don't know. Now, as I was saying..."

"I have begun to suspect that time is, in some sense I don't yet fully comprehend, subjective to the viewer. What a day signifies to me is quite different than what it signifies to you. How strange my day might seem, were I able to see it through your eyes."

"Ling Xuan, I insist that you listen to, and then answer, my questions."

"We shall see how our day looks tomorrow, shall we?" Ling Xuan rose slowly to his feet, crossed to the door, and rapped on the metal cladding with a gnarled knuckle. "Perhaps then we shall have more perspective on the subjectivity of time."

Cao jumped to his feet, raising his voice in objection. "Ling Xuan, I *insist* that you return to your seat and answer my questions!"

Agent Gu opened the door, in response to the knocking sound.

Ling smiled beatifically, looking back over his shoulder at Cao. "And if I insist to the sun that it stop in its courses, and remain unmoving in the

heavens, do you suppose that it will?"

With that Ling Xuan turned and walked out of the chamber, nodding slightly to Agent Gu as he passed.

Cao raced to the door, his cheeks flushed with anger. "Agent Gu, bring him to heel!"

Agent Gu glanced after the back of the retreating prisoner.

"That old man survived more than a year in the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing," Gu answered, "and never confessed. What do you suppose *I* could do that would make him talk?"

Gu walked out toward the courtyard, and Cao followed behind, his hands twisted into trembling fists at his sides.

Ling had walked out into the sunlit courtyard, and he glanced back at Cao as he sat, gracefully folding his legs under him.

"Tomorrow, don't forget," he called to Cao. "Perhaps that will be the day in which we find answers."

* * * *

Back at the Ministry of War, across the concourse from the Eastern Depot, Cao Wen sat in his small cubicle, surveying the mounds of paper before him, hundreds of notes and maps and charts, the product of months' work.

"Cao?" an impatient voice called from behind him, startling him.

Cao turned, pulse racing, to find the imposing figure of the Deputy Minister of War standing behind him.

"Deputy Minister Wu," Cao said breathlessly, rising to his feet and bowing.

Wu waved him to return to his seat, an annoyed expression on his broad face. "Is it too much to hope that you have completed your survey of the archives, and your report on the Mexica is finally ready to present to the Minister?"

Cao blanched, and shook his head. "Your pardon, O Honorable Deputy Minister, but while my researches are very nearly complete, I still have one final resource to investigate before my survey is ready for review."

"I take it you refer to this prisoner of the Eastern Depot? Were you not scheduled to interview him today?"

"Yes," Cao answered reluctantly. "But our initial meeting was not entirely ... productive. It is my intention to return to the Eastern Depot tomorrow to complete his interrogation."

"Was this Ling Xuan forthcoming with strategic details about the Mexica? The emperor is most desirous of a complete analysis of the possibilities for invasion of the Mexica isthmus, once our pacification of Fusang is complete, and the Minister of War is eager to present the Ministry's findings on the matter."

"The urgency is well understood, Deputy Minister." Cao shifted uneasily on his bench. "But I believe this final interview will provide much needed detail for the survey, and greatly improve the emperor's understanding of the strategic possibilities."

"I suppose you are well aware of the fact that a survey well received by the Dragon Throne will do much to enhance the estimation of a scholar so far unable to pass the juren level examinations, and would greatly aid one's chances of advancement within the imperial bureaucracy."

Cao brightened, and sat straighter. "Most certainly, Deputy Minister."

"The converse, however, is also true," Wu said, his eyes narrowed, "and a report which displeases the Minister, to say nothing of displeasing the emperor, Son of Heaven, may-he-reign-ten-thousand-years, could do irreparable damage to a young bureaucrat's career prospects. Such a one might find himself assigned to the far provinces, inspecting grain yield and calculating annual tax levies for the rest of his life."

Cao swallowed hard. "It is understood, Deputy Minister."

The Deputy Minister nodded. "Good," he said, turning and walking briskly away. "See that it is not forgotten."

* * * *

The next day, Cao Wen stood over Ling Xuan, who again sat in the middle of the concourse, his eyes fixed on the shadows on the ground.

"Note the shadows of the two towers," Ling said without looking up, before Cao had announced himself. "The spires atop each function like the points atop an equatorial sundial. If one views the many doorways opening off the central courtyard as marking the hours, the shadows indicate the time of day, with the southern tower indicating the time in the summer months, when the sun is high in the sky, and the northern tower indicating the time in the winter, when the sun is lower."

Ling at last looked up at Cao.

"Tell me," the old man said, "do you suppose the architects of the Eastern Depot intended the shadows for this purpose, or is this merely an

auspicious happenstance, the result of nothing more than divine providence?"

Cao Wen glanced over at Agent Gu, who stood beside him. Gu only shrugged, helplessly.

"I intend to complete our interview this morning, Ling Xuan," Cao answered.

"Morning," Ling Xuan replied with a smile. "Afternoon. Evening and night. Shadows measure the hours by day, and drips of water by night. But if the towers were to be moved, what would become of the hours? In the days of the Southern Song dynasty, a great astronomer named Guo Shoujing constructed at Linfen in Shanxi Province a grand observatory, an intricate mechanism of bronze, perfectly aligned with the heavens. Later, in the Bright Dynasty, it was moved to Southern Capital. Though the instruments that constituted the observatory were no less intricate or precise after the move, they were intended for another geographic location and, after being relocated, no longer aligned with the heavens. The observatory no longer measured the movements of the celestial. What had been an invaluable tool became merely statuary. How many of us, removed from our proper position, likewise lose our usefulness?"

Cao tapped his foot and scowled. He was convinced there was still meat to be found in amongst the mad offal of the old man's ramblings, but he wasn't sure he had the patience to find it.

"You will accompany me to the interview chamber," Cao said, keeping his tone even, "where we can continue our conversation like civilized beings."

"As you wish," Ling said, smiling slightly, and rose to his feet on creaking joints.

* * * *

"Before the establishment of the Clear Dynasty, before the Manchu rescued the Middle Kingdom from the corruption of the Bright Dynasty, you journeyed on one of the Treasure Fleet voyages to the far side of the world, traveling east to Khalifah, Mexico, and Fusang."

It was a statement, not a question, but Cao Wen paused momentarily, nevertheless, to give Ling Xuan the opportunity to reply.

"I was a young scholar then," Ling said, "not yet having passed my jinshi examinations and become a Presented Scholar. I traveled to the Northern Capital from my home in the south, to serve the Dragon Throne

as best as I was able. My skills, apparently, were best served as chronicler aboard a Treasure Fleet dragon boat, and my skills with languages were likewise of some utility. The passage across the broad sea took long months, before landfall on the shores of Khalifah."

"I want to ask you about Mexica. The title of your account suggests that..."

"When I served the Shunzhi emperor, I once received a legation from Khalifah. But when the Shunzhi emperor went to take his place in the heavens, and the Kangxi emperor took the Dragon Throne, Han bureaucrats such as I quickly fell from favor. The Regent Aobai reversed as many of the policies of Shunzhi as he could, attempting to reassert Manchu domination, feeling that the emperor had permitted too many Han to enter positions of authority. There were insufficient numbers of qualified Manchu to replace all of the Han serving in the bureaucracy, so Aobai had to console himself by replacing all the Han already in post with candidates more easily swayed by his authority."

Cao sighed heavily. The old man rambled like a senile grandmother, but Cao had confirmed that he had indeed traveled among the Mexica, so he could well have the intelligence Cao needed to advance.

"To return to the subject of the Mexica..."

"I hated Aobai for years, you must understand." The old man shook his head, sadly. "He had taken from me my life and my livelihood. When he found me too highly respected in the Office of Transmission to eliminate without scandal, he had me arraigned on trumped-up charges of treason and remanded to the custody of the Embroidered Guard. Consider the irony, then, that eight years later, after Kangxi had reached his majority, the young emperor enlisted the aid of his uncle Songgotu in order to break free from the control of his regents, and had Aobai himself arrested on charges of usurping his authority. Aobai joined me here as a guest of the Embroidered Guard, and died soon after."

This was all ancient history, done and buried long before Cao was born. He shifted on the bench, impatient, and tried once more to regain control of the flow of conversation.

"Ling Xuan," Cao began, allowing the tone of his voice to rise slightly, "I must ask you to attend to my questions. I am on the urgent business of his supreme majesty, the Son of Heaven, and do not have time to waste in idle rambling."

"But the affairs of men turn in their courses just like the tracks of the stars in the heavens above," the old man continued, as though he hadn't heard a word Cao had said. "I understand that in the nations of Europa they have a conception of destiny as a wheel, like that of a mill, upon which men ride up and down. Too often those who ride the wheel up fail to recall that they will someday be borne downwards again. Thirty-four years after Songgotu helped his nephew Kangxi rid himself of the influence of the Regent Aobai, Kangxi had Songgotu himself jailed, in part for his complicity in the Heir Apparent's attempt to consolidate power. Songgotu joined us here, in the Outside Depot, for the briefest while, until Kangxi ordered him executed, without trial or confession."

Cao Wen remembered the scandal from his youth, hearing his father and uncles talking about the purge of Songgotu and his associates from the court.

"Ling Xuan..." Cao Wen began, but the old man went on before he could continue.

"The Heir Apparent himself, of course, is resident here now. Yinreng. We passed him in the courtyard, on our way into the interview chamber. A sad shell of a man he is, and perhaps not entirely sane. Of course, some say that the eldest prince Yinti employed Lamas to cast evil spells, the revelation of which resulted in Yinreng's earlier pardon and release from imprisonment, and reinstatement as heir and successor to Kangxi. But when he returned to his old ways on his release, the emperor finally had him removed from the line of succession, degraded in position, and placed here in perpetual confinement. Still, he seems harmless to me, and I believe that he may have developed some lasting affection for another of the men imprisoned here. But as his leanings were the nettle which originally set his father on the path of disowning him, I suppose that isn't unexpected."

Cao Wen raised his hand, attempting again to wrestle back control of the discussion, but the old man continued, unabated.

"There are those who say that some men lie with other men as a result of an accident of birth, while others say that it is a degradation which sets upon us as we grow, an illness and not a defect. But was the Heir Apparent fated to prefer the company of men to women in the bedchamber? Did the movement of the stars through the lunar mansions in the heavens dictate the life he would lead, up to and including his end here, imprisoned behind

these high, cold walls? Or did choices he made, through his life, affect the course of the stars through the heavens, in some sympathetic fashion? We know that man's destiny is linked with the heavens, but there remains the question of causation. Which is effected and which effects?"

"Ling Xuan, if you please..." Cao said with a weary sigh. He found that he was almost willing to surrender in frustration, and simply complete his report with the information he already had to hand.

"During the Warring States period of antiquity, the philosopher Shih-shen tried to explain the non-uniform movement of the Moon as the result of man's actions. He said that, when a wise prince occupies the throne, the Moon follows the right way, and that when the prince is not wise and the ministers exercise power, the Moon loses its way. But if we presume that the ancients knew more than we do in all such matters, where would that leave the spirit of invention? The ancients, as praiseworthy as they were, could not have constructed a marvel like the Forbidden City. Can we not, then, assume that, in the generations since, we have likewise constructed concepts that they also could not have attempted? I like to believe that the world grows as a person does, maturing with the slow turning of years, becoming ever more knowledgeable and developed. But many would hold that such thoughts are an affront to the luminous ancestors who preceded us, and whose lofty heights it is not given to us to reach. I suppose my thoughts were poisoned by the clerics of the Mexica. There, they believe that this is just the most recent of a series of worlds, and that each world increases in complexity and elegance."

Cao Wen leaned forward, cautiously optimistic. Was his patience about to be rewarded?

But before he went on, the old man leaned back, and breathed a ragged sigh. "But perhaps these are discussions for another day. I find that my voice tires, and my thoughts run away from me. Perhaps we should continue our discussion tomorrow."

The old man rose, and went to knock on the metal-clad door.

As Agent Gu opened the door, Cao rocketed up off the bench, raising his hand to object.

"Tomorrow, then," Ling said, glancing over his shoulder as he shuffled down the passageway to the courtyard beyond.

Agent Gu just shrugged as Cao's mouth worked, soundless and furious.

* * * *

Back at the Ministry of War, Cao Wen looked over the paperwork he'd amassed. Spread before him were the notes he himself had taken by hand, long months before, which had led him to Ling Xuan in the first place.

Cao had been through everything in the imperial archives on the subject of the Mexica, but much of the early contact with the Mexica had occurred during the Bright Dynasty, and many of the records from those days had been lost when the Clear Dynasty took control. Worse, much of what remained was fragmentary at best. Cao had spent endless days combing through the archives, hungry for any mention of the Mexica, when he finally stumbled upon a simple inventory list of the archives from the reign of the Chongzhen emperor, the last of the Bright Dynasty. Among dozens of bureaucratic documents in which no one had taken any interest in long years was listed one item that caught Cao's eye, and sped the pace of his heart—a Ling Xuan's account of a Treasure Fleet voyage to Mexica.

In the weeks that followed, Cao searched unsuccessfully for the account, checking other archives and inventories, but quite by chance came across a communication from the eunuch director of the Embroidered Guard to the Office of Transmission, intended for the eyes of the Regent Aobai, listing all of the suspects temporarily housed in the Eastern Depot. The report dated from the early days of the reign of the Kangxi emperor, while the emperor had still been a child and the regency controlled the empire, before the introduction of the palace memorial. Cao very nearly returned the communication to its cubbyhole without a second glance, and, had he done so, his researches would have been at an end. But instead he chanced to notice a name at the bottom of the communication, in amongst the hundreds of other names—Ling Xuan.

Cao had looked into the matter further, and found no burial record, nor record of any conviction, for a Ling Xuan. He had, however, discovered that Ling had once held a position of minor authority during the reign of the Shunzhi emperor.

Cao had petitioned the Deputy Minister of War for weeks to arrange the authorization to contact the Embroidered Guard in order to confirm that Ling Xuan was still imprisoned at the Eastern Depot, and once confirmation was received Cao labored another span of weeks to receive authorization to cross the concourse and interview the prisoner himself.

At the time, Cao Wen had considered it an almost unbelievable stroke of good fortune that he should chance to discover that the author of the missing account, so crucial to his survey of the Mexica, still lived. Now, having met and spent time with the old man, he was beginning to rethink that position.

* * * *

Cao Wen stood over Ling Xuan, who sat in the middle of the courtyard.

"Why do you not move from that position, Ling Xuan?"

"But I am always moving, though I do not unfold my legs from beneath me." The old man looked up at Cao with shaded eyes, and smiled. "I move because the Earth moves, and with it I go. As Lo-hsia-Hung of the Western Han Dynasty said, 'The Earth moves constantly but people do not know it. They are as persons in a closed boat, and when it proceeds they do not perceive it.'"

"You speak a great deal of astronomy, and yet the records indicate that you served in the Office of Transmission. But the study of the heavens is forbidden to all but the imperial astronomers."

"When I was first brought to the Eastern Depot," Ling explained, a distant look in his eyes, "I was interred for some time in the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing. The days were long and full of pain, but the nights were largely my own. In my narrow, dank cell, I sat the long watches of the night, unable to see a patch of clear sky. However, there was a small hole cut high in the wall, for ventilation, and I learned that it opened onto the adjacent cell. In that cell was a dismissed minister, previously the head of the Directory of Astronomy. His name was Cui, high mountain. He had offended the Regent Aobai in the days after the death of the Shanzhi emperor."

Ling drew a ragged sigh, and averted his eyes before continuing.

"We helped one another survive through those weeks and months. I told the astronomer tales of my travels across the oceans, and he told me everything he had ever learned about the heavens."

Ling stood up on creaking joints, and faced Cao.

"One night, the cell next to mine was silent, and the night after that, another voice answered when I called through the vent. I never learned what became of my friend, but I remember every word he ever spoke to me."

With that, the old man turned and started toward the interview chamber, where Agent Gu stood by the open door.

"Come along," Ling called back over his shoulder to Cao, who lingered in the sunny yard. "You wanted to discuss the Mexica, did you not?"

* * * *

Cao sat at the worn table, and pulled a leather tube from the folds of his robe. Removing a cap from the tube's end, he pulled out a rolled sheaf of paper and, setting the tube to one side, arranged the papers meticulously before him. Ling Xuan looked on, dispassionately.

Finally, his notes arranged to his satisfaction, and with an inked brush in hand, Cao began to speak, impatiently. "I have already spent the better part of a year in my survey of the Mexica, Ling Xuan, and I would very much like to complete my report before another year begins."

"But which year, yes?" Ling asked, raising an eyebrow. "We in the Middle Kingdom know two. The twenty-four solar nodes of the farmer's calendar, and the twelve or thirteen lunar months of the lunisolar calendar. The Mexica had more than one calendar, too."

Cao sighed. He had little interest in a repeat of the previous days' performance, and yet here he was, about to assay the same role. "Ling Xuan..."

"The Mexica have a solar calendar, which like our own was made up of 365 days," the old man interrupted before Cao could continue. "Can you imagine it? Two cultures, so different and divided by history and geography, and yet we parcel out time in the same allotments. But unlike us, the Mexica divide their solar year into eighteen months of twenty days each, leaving aside five more, which they call 'empty days.' These are days of ill omen, when no work or ritual is to be performed."

"That's very interesting," Cao said, in a rush, "but to return to the subject at hand..."

"But like us, they are not satisfied with only one calendrical system," Ling continued, undaunted. "In addition to their solar year, they have a second calendar of 260 days, marked out by interlocking cycles of twenty day-signs and thirteen numbers. Again, reminiscent of our own system of element and animal, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose so," Cao agreed, weakly.

"But the Mexica have another calendar, on a scale even grander than the other two. In the capital city of the Mexica, Place of the Stone Cactus,

there is a massive circular stone, thicker than a child is tall and wider than the height of two men. This is a calendar too, of a sort, but while the other calendars measure the passage of days, months, and years, this massive calendar of stone is used to measure the passage of worlds themselves. As I told you, the Mexica believe that this is the fifth and most recent world created by the gods. They believe that this world was constructed only a few hundred years ago, in the year 13-Reed, and that its peoples and cultures were put in place, fully formed and with their histories already in place, as a test of the Mexica's faith."

"You traveled to the capital of the Mexica?" Cao asked, sitting forward, readying his brush over a blank sheet of paper.

"Yes," the old man answered, a faraway look in his eyes, "a party of us, along with the commander of the Treasure Fleet, traveled overland for long days and weeks before we reached the heart of the Mexica empire. Their city of Place of the Stone Cactus was as large and grand as the Northern Capital itself, hundreds of thousands of men and women toiling away in the service of their emperor."

Ling Xuan's eyes fluttered closed for a brief moment, and he swayed, momentarily lost in thought.

"The Mexica know when this world will end," he went on. "It will come in the year of 4-Movement, when the world's calendar has run its course. But which cycle, yes? In Place of the Stone Cactus, I saw steam-powered automatons of riveted bronze, which symbolically represented the jaguars, hurricanes, fires, and rains that destroyed the previous worlds."

Cao Wen's brush raced down the page in precise movements, as he took careful notes. "Steam-powered, you say?"

Ling Xuan nodded. "Yes, and while the Mexica had never before seen a horse, they had steam-powered trolleys that could carry them back and forth across the breadth of their broad valley in a twinkling."

"What of their military capacity?" Cao asked, eagerly. "Were you given any glimpse of their level of armament?"

Ling Xuan blinked slowly. "I did, in fact, spend considerable time with an officer of their army, an Eagle Knight of the first rank. I was one of the few to have learned the rudiments of Nahuatl, the Mexica's tongue, and as such I was appointed to tour their city and report back what I'd learned. Hummingbird Feather was to be my guide."

Ling Xuan dropped his gaze, and his eyes came to rest on the leather tube at the edge of the table, in which Cao Wen had brought his notes.

"This reminds me of something," the old man said, pointing at the tube.

"Something to do with the Mexica?"

The old man nodded, slowly, his eyes not leaving the tube. Then he shook his head, once, leaving Cao unsure whether the old man had meant to reply in the affirmative, in the negative, or if in fact he'd replied at all.

"I remember something my friend Cui told me. A metal tube capped on either end by ground-glass lenses, used for far viewing. A Remote-Viewing Mirror, he called it. A tool employed by the Directorate of Astronomy. Have you heard of such a thing?"

Cao nodded, impatiently. "Yes, I believe I've seen them in operation. What of it?"

"I would very much like to see such a device for myself. My eyes are not as strong as they once were, and it would be a welcome sight to see the shapes upon the moon's surface. If you could arrange such a thing, I would be happy to tell you all I saw of the Mexica's armament and defenses."

Then the old man rose, rapped on the door, and disappeared from view, leaving Cao in the room with his notes, his brush, and his questions.

* * * *

It took Cao Wen several days to receive authorization from the Deputy Minister of War to requisition the far-seeing device from the Directorate of Astronomy, several more days to locate the bureaucrat within the Directorate who was responsible for materiel and equipment, and an additional week of wheedling and cajoling to get the astronomer to recognize the authority of the Deputy Minister's order.

Cao tried on several occasions in the interval to renew his interview with Ling Xuan, but every attempt failed. Each time, the old man would look up at him, blink slowly, and ask whether Cao carried the far-seeing device. When he saw that Cao did not, Ling would turn his eyes back to the ground, watching the shadows in their slow course across the ground.

Finally, Cao managed to retrieve the device from the Directorate of Astronomy, and a short while later sat in the interview room, carefully removing the device from its protective sheath. He presented the object to Ling Xuan, with Agent Gu standing by as witness.

While Ling turned the device over in his hands, eyes glistening and mouth open in wonder, Cao read aloud from an official release document, signed with the chop of the Head Director of Astronomy, and countersigned by the Deputy Minister of War. "This far viewing device, the Remote-Viewing Mirror, remains the property of the Directorate of Astronomy, as decreed by his majesty the emperor, but by special order of the Deputy Minister of War, it is being loaned for a short time to one Ling Xuan, a temporary resident at the Outside Depot of the Embroidered Guard. Be it known that this Ling Xuan is not to allow the Remote-Viewing Mirror to pass into any hands other than his own, nor is he to reveal the details of its manufacture to any but those parties determined by imperial decree as worthy to hold such knowledge."

Cao paused, and glanced up from the document at the old man, whose eyes were fixed on the device in his hands.

"Ling Xuan, do you understand these terms?"

The old man simply held the device up for a closer inspection, marveling.

"Temporary Resident Ling," Agent Gu said, his tone martial, stepping forward incrementally and looming over the old man as menacingly as he was able. "Do you understand the terms as recited to you?"

Ling Xuan nodded, absently. "Yes, yes, of course."

"Thank you for bearing witness, Agent Gu." Cao nodded to Gu, and motioned him toward the door. "Now, with your permission, I would like at this point to continue my interview with Ling Xuan."

Agent Gu bowed, crossed the floor, and closed the door behind him as he left.

"Now," Cao said to the old man, his tone turning dark, "let us talk about the Mexica."

Ling Xuan held the Remote-Viewing Mirror lovingly and, without lifting his eyes from the device, began to speak.

* * * *

"Hummingbird Feather, who I like to think became my friend in the weeks we stayed in Place of the Stone Cactus, explained to me the structure of the army of the Mexica. He was an Eagle Knight and a Quauhyahcatl, or a Great Captain of the Mexica army, meaning that he had taken five foreign captives in combat. When the Treasure Fleet arrived,

though, the Mexica had not gone to war against their neighbors in almost a generation. And so they fought, instead, the War of the Flowers.

“The army of the Mexica is organized into Banners of twenty men each—and here, too, we hear echoes of our own culture, do we not? So like the Banners of our Manchu masters, yes? In any case, twenty of such banners make up a battalion of four hundred men, and twenty of these an army of eight thousand. The best warriors were inducted into the orders of the Jaguar and the Eagle, and advancement was measured by how many captives one took while in battle. In times of peace, though, there were no captives to be had. How then to measure one's worth?

“The Mexica challenge their neighbors to fight in a War of the Flowers. We were lucky enough to arrive in Place of the Stone Cactus during one of these ceremonial tournaments. The armies of the Mexica and those of their neighbors gather in the broad plains beyond the valley of the Stone Cactus, and meet in mock combat. Though the blows are not killing blows, and no blood is spilled on the plains, the stakes are no less high than in warfare. The combatants in the War of the Flowers take prisoners, capturing their defeated foes, and when each side decides that it has taken enough prisoners, the battle is ended. The side which has captured the most of its enemy is declared the winner, and the two armies return home with their spoils. The captives are executed or enslaved, depending on the moods of their captors.

“In this way, the army of the Mexica are able to keep their martial skills honed and ready, even when there is no enemy to be bested.”

Cao scarcely looked up from his notes, his brush flying across the page.

“Yes, yes,” Cao said, eagerly. “Now, how do the generals of the armies communicate their orders to the officers of the banners, and how do the banners’ leaders communicate the orders on to their subordinates?”

* * * *

Days passed, and Cao Wen returned again and again to the Outside Depot, filling page after page with notes on the Mexica, dictated by the old man. He'd originally hoped for one or two choice facts with which to spice his survey, and, after long frustrated weeks wrangling the uncommunicative prisoner, he'd begun to doubt that he'd get even that much. Now, though, it seemed that flood gates had opened, and the old man was providing more detailed information than Cao had dreamed

possible. Now, the thought of advancement within the ministry as reward for all his efforts, which he'd originally held as a slender hope, seemed a very achievable goal.

This morning, the old man was waiting for him in the interview room, the Remote-Viewing Mirror in his lap.

"I think we near the end of our cycle of interviews, Ling Xuan," Cao said, not bothering with pleasantries. He slid onto the bench across the table from the old man, and arranged his papers and brushes before him. "I need just one final bit of information, and my report will be complete. I'm not sure just what it is, yet, but I believe that you must have it within you. I want to hear more about the automation of the Mexica. From what you describe, it sounds as though their technological development has taken a different path than our own, but that they seem not far behind us."

Ling looked up, smiling.

"I was able to spend long hours last night, watching the skies through this remarkable device. Agent Gu was kind enough to allow me to remain in the courtyard all hours, and so I had a much fuller view of the heavens than I am allowed from my small window." The old man lifted the Remote-Viewing Mirror to his right eye and, squeezing his left eye shut, peered through the device at Cao, sitting across from him. Then he laughed, that soft, strong noise like distant peals of thunder, and continued. "I have been following the path of Fire Star across the heavens. In the last few months, it has risen in the early hours of the morning, rising earlier and earlier every day, tracking steadily eastward across the sky. Just a few weeks ago, it rose shortly after sunset, and the most remarkable thing occurred. Cui had told me about it, but until this occasion I never had the opportunity to see it for myself. Fire Star seemed to stop in the heavens, and then turned back, now moving westward across the skies. Now it rises at sunset, tracks westward across the sky, and sets by dawn. In another few weeks, if what Cui told me holds true, it will reverse course again, moving once more eastward across the sky, rising earlier and earlier until it once again rises at dawn and sets at dusk."

"Fascinating," Cao said, without feeling. "Now, to return to the Mexica..."

"There are shapes, shadows, and lines upon the surface of Fire Star, I have found. This most ingenious device allows me to see them with my own eye."

"The automatons of the Mexica, Ling Xuan," Cao repeated. "Now, you say that they are little more than parlor tricks, fixed in place and able to go through only rote motions. But did the Mexica display the capacity to develop these trinkets into something more? A siege engine of sorts, perhaps?"

"Cui told me that the best astronomers of his time felt that these wandering stars were worlds such as our own. Tell me, do you suppose if that is so, it might not be peopled with beings such as ourselves?"

"Ling Xuan..." Cao began, rubbing the bridge of his nose, his tone menacing.

The old man, his eyes half-lidded, swayed on his bench, like a tall tree blown by a high wind. "I'm tired, Cao Wen. Too many late nights and early mornings, too little sleep. Let us continue tomorrow, yes? I am sure I will be in better spirits then, and better able to hear your questions."

Ling stood, and knocked on the door.

"But..." Cao began, and then trailed off as the old man exited after Agent Gu swung open the door. Cao sighed, dramatically, and shrugged. He had waited this long. What harm could another day do? But if by then the end of the next day he did not have the answers he needed ... ?

Cao felt his patience was at an end. He gathered up his papers, and to the empty room he said, "Tomorrow, then."

* * * *

The next day found Cao Wen and Ling Xuan back in their accustomed places.

Ling seemed more lucid and animated today, and didn't wait for Cao to initiate their discussion before returning to their perennial topic of conversation. "All of this talk of the Mexica has reminded me of something I've long since forgotten. A salient fact about the culture of the Mexica that I did not realize until years after my visit to their empire."

"What is it?" Cao asked, warily.

"It is one final fact that You must have for your survey. It is something about the culture of the Mexica that I have realized only later in life, which is the reason that the Dragon Throne will prevail, if it should go to war against them. But in exchange for this final bit of information, I request one last favor."

Cao glanced at the Remote-Viewing Mirror, clutched as always in the old man's gnarled hands. What would the old man want this time?

"I would go, just once more, beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot. From my vantage point within the Outside Depot, there is only so much of the night sky I can see, and there is so, so much more to behold."

Cao straightened, and folded his arms across his chest. "Absolutely not," he said, sharply. "Out of the question." Cao rubbed the bridge of his nose, and tried to compose an appropriate counter offer. "No. Instead, if you don't tell me what I want to know, you will be punished. Yes, and I will have the Remote-Viewing Mirror taken from you."

Ling shrugged, unmoved. "I have seen the heavens with my own eyes, from within my little box. If you take away my vision, I will still have my memories, but if I am unable to venture beyond these walls, my memories will be all I have, anyway. What have I to lose?"

Cao jumped to his feet, and began furiously to pace the floor.

"This is unseemly, Ling Xuan. This is unacceptable."

"And yet it is happening," Ling said, his expression serene.

Cao Wen stormed to the door, and pounded loudly with the heel of his fist.

Gu opened the door, his expression curious.

"Agent Gu, remove this prisoner from my sight immediately!" Cao Wen said imperiously.

Gu looked from Cao to Ling and back, shrugged, and took the old man by the elbow, leading him slowly from the chamber. "This way, old man."

Cao collapsed back onto his seat, glowering.

Cao Wen sat on the hard, unforgiving bench, waiting while bureaucrats shuffled back and forth across the polished floors of the Ministry of War, going about the business of the empire.

Cao didn't have to test the old man's resolve. He knew that Ling meant what he said. If Ling said he wouldn't answer any further questions without receiving his boon, he wouldn't speak another word. Not another useful word, at least.

"Deputy Minister Wu will see you now, Cao Wen," said a steward, appearing at the open door.

Cao swallowed hard, rose to his feet, and crossed the floor.

"O Honorable Deputy Minister," Cao said, bowing low.

The imposing figure of Deputy Minister Wu was crowded into a spare, simply made chair on the far side of the room. There was a low table at his side, covered with rolled maps, bound sheaves of paper, and small

notebooks. At his elbow stood his secretary, a weasel-faced man with ink-stained fingers, who recorded everything said in the room in exhaustive detail.

"Cao Wen," the Deputy Minister said, a faint smile on his thick lips. "I harbor hopes that you come to deliver your survey of the Mexica."

"Not quite yet, this one is afraid to report," Cao Wen answered, his voice tremulous.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"My interrogation of the prisoner Ling Xuan these last weeks has been exceedingly productive," Cao continued. "I believe that, with one final addition, it will be complete and ready to present to the Minister of War."

"And then on to the Dragon Throne itself?" Wu asked, eyes narrowed.

Cao Wen swelled with pride, but his voice wavered nervously when he answered. "Yes, Deputy Minister. I believe it will not only summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the Mexica military, but the survey should further provide a sound justification for why the Middle Kingdom will inevitably defeat the Mexica militarily, should it come to open warfare."

"And what is this last addition, one wonders, and what is it that the Ministry of War will be asked to authorize in its pursuit?"

With as little detail and as briefly as possible, Cao explained that the old man who was his primary source for the report had requested one night beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot, in exchange for his final testimony.

"For what purpose?" Wu asked, when Cao had completed his summation. "Some conjugal business, perhaps? A fine meal, or an evening of drunken revelry?"

"No," Cao said simply. "Star-gazing."

Wu looked at Cao, disbelieving. "And in return for this small privilege, we will get the secret to defeating the Mexica?"

"Yes," Cao said.

The Deputy Minister steepled his fingers, and pursed his thick lips.

"Having paid quite a lot to get this far along in the game, Cao Wen, it seems a shame to withdraw when there is just one final wager to make. You will have your authorization. But return with this storied survey in hand, or don't bother returning at all."

Cao bowed, deeply, and scuttled away.

* * * *

Three days later, approaching the middle watches of the night, Cao Wen arrived at the Eastern Depot, where he was met by Director Fei Ren.

"I am not happy with this development," Director Fei said, as though his expression were not explanation enough, "but the Deputy Minister of War has managed to get the approval of the emperor himself for this little excursion, so there isn't anything *I* can do about it."

Before Cao could reply, Agent Gu arrived, escorting Ling Xuan.

"Temporary Resident Ling Xuan," Director Fei said, turning to the old man. "Know that a great many bureaucrats have been put to a great deal of trouble on your behalf."

The old man just smiled, clutching the Remote-Viewing Mirror to his chest.

"You have until sunrise, old man," Director Fei said, and then turned his attentions to Agent Gu. "This is your first mission beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot, is it not, Gu?"

Agent Gu bowed, and stammered a reply in the affirmative.

"Such was my recollection." Fei looked from the old man to Gu, and scowled. "If Ling Xuan attempts to escape, know that you are free to take whatever means are necessary to insure that our *temporary* resident returns home to the Eastern Depot."

"Yes, sir, Director," Agent Gu said, punctuated by a further bow.

With that, Director Fei turned on his heel, and disappeared back into the labyrinth of the Eastern Depot.

"Let's get on with it," Cao said, impatiently.

With Cao on one side, and Agent Gu on the other, Ling Xuan passed through the archway and into the concourse beyond, walking out of the Eastern Depot for the first time in more than fifty years.

* * * *

They threaded through the boulevards and avenues of the Northern Capital, lined on all sides with the offices of the Six Ministries and countless imperial directorates and bureaus. They came at last to a public square, far from the palace, surrounded by low buildings, inns and residences of the meaner sort. Lamplights glowed warmly from within them, but the sky overhead was dark and moonless, the stars glittering like gems against black silk.

Ling Xuan paused, and took a deep breath through his nostrils, looking up at the skies with his naked eyes. "I have been imprisoned behind four

walls for more than half of my life, but I have come to realize that my mind has been imprisoned even longer. The noble truths that Cui taught me through that little vent, while we were guests of the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing, were far grander and broader than anything I'd previously imagined. I have seen more of the world than many, read more than most, and yet even I had only the most tenuous grasp of reality."

Above them, the stars in the vertiginous heavens seemed to turn while they watched, and Cao found himself becoming dizzy.

"Do you know why my friend Cui was imprisoned in the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing?" the old man continued, glancing momentarily down from the stars to the two men at his side. "It was, so he said, because he had provided readings of the heavens that were inauspicious for the regent's reign. In fact, that was not his crime. Cui challenged the accepted wisdom. He devoted his life to studying the heavens, and made a frightening discovery. Our world is not, as we have always believed, the center of the universe, with the Sun, Moon, and stars twirling around us. Through a careful study of the heavens, Cui came to realize that, in fact, our world was just one of many, all of which circled around the Sun. What is more, he claimed that the stars themselves might be other suns, out in the distant heavens. Perhaps a small fraction of those other suns might have worlds of their own, and some small fraction of those might be peopled. We might not be the only beings in creation able to look upon ourselves and wonder." The old man paused, and smiled ruefully. "Of course, this offended the Regent Aobai, who was convinced Cui had concocted his theory only to insult the young Kangxi emperor."

Agent Gu shook his head in disbelief, and the old man fell silent. "The Earth circles around the sun? You might as well say that the Dragon Throne exists to serve me, and not the other way around."

"You might indeed." Ling smiled, his eyes twinkling.

Cao swayed on his feet. He felt unsteady, as though he stood on the edge of a precipice, about to fall into the abyss.

"Ling Xuan, you promised me one final fact about the Mexica," Cao said, uneasily.

"So I did," Ling said, nodding. "So I did. And I will tell you. It is this."

The old man leaned closer to Cao, and spoke softly, like thunder more distant than ever before, as though he were communicating some secret in confidence that he didn't want the stars above to overhear.

"The Mexica, as clever and bright and ferocious as they may be, are still blinded by their faith. The most learned among them honestly believes that the world is but a few hundred years old, and all evidence to the contrary is merely a test of their faith. We of the Middle Kingdom, I would argue, cling with as much tenacity to beliefs and superstitions no more grounded in reality than that, but with one notable difference. Ours is a culture that can produce a mind like Cui's, a mind that challenges received wisdom, which questions the foundations of knowledge itself. If we manage to produce only one like him in every dozen generations, we will still manage, in the fullness of time, to conquer the universe. Like the fraction of worlds of the fraction of stars in the great immensity of the heavens, that ensure that we are not alone, just one small spark of genius in the vast sea of complacency will mean that history does not stand still."

Ling Xuan turned, and headed back the way they had come.

"I am ready to return home to my cell now, thank you," the old man said, calling back to Cao and Gu over his shoulder. "I have seen all I needed to see."

* * * *

The next morning, as Cao Wen struggled to work out how to conclude his report, he received a visitor to his cubicle in the Ministry of War. It was Agent Gu, dressed in simple gray robes.

"Gu? What are you doing here?"

"At the request of Director Fei, I come to tell you that Ling Xuan, temporary resident of the Outside Depot, died in the night. From all signs, it was not a suicide, nor is there any indication of foul play."

Cao blinked, a confused expression spread across his face.

"The old man died?"

"Yes," Gu replied. "Of extreme old age, or so I am given to understand."

"And yet he waited long enough to walk once more under the stars as a free man," Cao observed.

"Perhaps he felt that it was important enough to live for," Gu said, unsure, "and having done so, his work was done."

Cao sighed, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Strange timing, no doubt, but he was old and the elderly have a habit of dying." Cao regarded Gu's plain gray robes. "But here you are, beyond

the walls of the Eastern Depot yourself, and so adorned that you could pass for a simple merchant in the streets."

"Yes," Agent Gu said, with a smile that commingled embarrassment and pride. "It is the opinion of Director Fei that I have completed my training, and will be of better use to the Dragon Throne beyond the walls, rather than within." Gu paused, and shifted uncomfortably. "Cao Wen, I must ask you. What are your thoughts about the things that Ling Xuan said to us in the night, about the Sun and the Earth and the stars, about the Middle Kingdom and the Mexica and all?"

Cao Wen shrugged. "All I can say is that everything Ling reported to me these long weeks has been true, as far as I have been able to determine—the intelligence on the Mexica and the facts the old man learned from Astronomer Cui alike. But who am I to judge?"

Agent Gu nodded, absently, and with a final bow, departed, leaving Cao with his work.

There remained only a few more characters to brush onto the final page, and then Cao's detailed report on the astronomer Cui was complete. This appended to his report about the Mexica, Cao rolled up the papers and slid them into a leather tube. Then he rose to his feet, arranged his robes around him, and headed toward the office of the Deputy Minister to hand in his survey.

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ROXIE
by Robert Reed

In “Roxie,” Robert Reed poignantly depicts the tragedy of death and the wondrous gift of life. Commenting on the story, he tells us that, “while my daughter is lobbying hard for a new dog, I have, so far, resisted every urge.”

She wakes me at five minutes before five in the morning, coming into the darkened bedroom with tags clinking and claws skating across the old oak floor, and then she uses a soft whine that nobody else will hear.

I sit up and pull myself to the end of the bed, dressing in long pants and new walking shoes—the old shoes weren't helping my balky arch and Achilles—and then I stop at the bathroom before pulling a warm jacket from the front closet. My dog keeps close track of my progress. In her step and the big eyes is enthusiasm and single-minded focus. At the side door, I tell her to sit and hold still please, and in the dark, I fasten the steel pinch collar and six-foot leash around a neck that has grown alarmingly thin.

Anymore our walks are pleasant, even peaceful events—no more hard tugging or challenging other dogs. A little after five in the morning, early in March, the world is black and quiet beneath a cold, clear sky. Venus is brilliant, the moon cut thin. Crossing the empty four-lane road to the park, we move south past the soccer field and then west, and then south again on a narrow asphalt sidewalk. A hundred dogs pass this ground daily. The city has leash laws, and I have always obeyed them. But the clean-up laws are new, and only a fraction of the dog-walkers carry plastic sacks and flashlights. Where my dog has pooped for thirteen years, she poops now, and I kneel to stare at what she has done, convincing myself that the stool is reasonably firm, if exceptionally fragrant.

A good beginning to our day.

We continue south to a set of white wooden stairs. She doesn't like stairs anymore, but she climbs them easily enough. Then we come back again on the wide bike path—a favorite stretch of hers. In the spring, rabbits will nest in the mowed grass, and every year she will find one or several little holes stuffed with tiny, half-formed bunnies.

On this particular morning, nothing is caught and killed.

An older man and his German shepherd pass us on the sidewalk below. Tony is a deep-voiced gentleman who usually waves from a distance and chats when we're close. He loves to see Roxie bounce about, and she very much likes him. But in the darkness he doesn't notice us, and I'm not in the mood to shout. He moves ahead and crosses the four-lane road, and when

we reach that place, Roxie pauses, smelling where her friend has just been and leaking a sorry little whine.

Home again, I pill my dog. She takes Proin to control bedwetting, plus half a metronidazole to fight diarrhea. She used to take a full metro, but there was an endless night a few weeks ago when she couldn't rest, not indoors or out. She barked at nothing, which is very strange for her. Maybe a high-pitched sound was driving her mad. But our vet warned that she could have a tendency toward seizures, and the metro can increase their likelihood and severity. Which is why I pulled her back to just half a pill in the morning.

I pack the medicine into a handful of canned dog food, stinky and prepared with the senior canine in mind. She waits eagerly and gobbles up the treat in a bite, happily licking the linoleum where I dropped it, relishing that final taste.

Before six in the morning, I pour orange juice and go down to my basement office. My PC boots up without incident. I discover a fair amount of e-mail, none of it important. Then I start jumping between sites that offer a good look at science and world events. *Sky and Telescope* has a tiny article about an asteroid of uncertain size and imprecise orbit. But after a couple of nights of observation, early estimates describe an object that might be a kilometer in diameter, and in another two years, it seems that this intruder will pass close to the Earth, bringing with it a one-in-six-thousand chance of an impact.

"But that figure won't stand up," promises one astronomer. "This happens all the time. Once we get more data, this danger is sure to evaporate to nothing."

* * * *

My future wife was a reporter for the Omaha newspaper. I knew her because in those days, a lot of my friends were reporters. On a sultry summer evening, she and I went to the same Fourth of July party; over the smell of gunpowder, Leslie mentioned that she'd recently bought a husky puppy.

Grinning, I admitted that I'd always been intrigued by sled dogs.

"You should come meet Roxie sometime," she said.

"Why Roxie?" I asked.

"Foxy Roxie," she explained. "She's a red husky. To me, she sort of looks like an enormous fox."

Her dog was brownish red and white, with a dark red mask across her narrow face, accenting her soulful blue eyes. Leslie wasn't home when I first visited, but her dog was in the backyard, absolutely thrilled to meet me. (Huskies are the worst guard dogs in the world.) Roxie was four or five months old, with a short coat and a big, long-legged frame. Sitting behind the chain-link gate, she licked the salt off my offered fingers. And then she hunkered down low, feigning submission. But her human was elsewhere, and I didn't want the responsibility of opening gates and possibly letting this wolfish puppy escape. So I walked away, triggering a string of plaintive wails that caused people for a mile in every direction to ask, "Now who's torturing that poor, miserable creature?"

Leslie and I started dating in late October. But the courtship always had a competitive triangular feel about it.

My new girlfriend worked long hours and drove a two-hour commute to and from Omaha. She didn't have enough time for a hyperactive puppy. Feeling sorry for both of them, I would drop by to tease her dog with brief affections. Or if I stayed the night, I'd get up at some brutally early hour—before seven o'clock, some mornings—and dripping with fatigue, I'd join the two of them on a jaunt through the neighborhood and park and back again.

In those days, Roxie lived outside as much as she lived in. But the backyard gate proved inadequate; using her nose, she would easily flip the latch up and out of the way. Tying the latch only bought a few more days of security. Leaping was easy work, and a four-foot chain-link fence was no barrier at all. A series of ropes and lightweight chains were used and discarded. Finally Leslie went to a farm supply store and bought a steel chain strong enough to yank cars out of ditches. Years later, a friend from Alaska visited, and I asked sheepishly if our chain was overkill. No, it was pretty standard for sled dogs, she conceded. Then she told me what I already knew: "These animals love to run."

One morning, somebody's dog was barking, and Leslie asked me to make sure it wasn't hers. Peering out the dining room window, I found a beautiful red-and-white husky dancing on the patio, happy as can be.

"It's not your dog," I told my girlfriend.

Even burdened with the heavy chain, Roxie had killed a squirrel, and now she was happily flinging the corpse into the air and catching it again. The game was delicious fun until the limp squirrel fell out of reach, and

then the wailing began. I got dressed and found a shovel in the garage, and when I picked up her prize by its tail, the dog leaped happily. Oh, I was saving her day! But with the first spade of earth, she saw my betrayal for what it was, and the wailing grew exponentially.

Two nights later, Leslie called for help. Again, her dog had killed an animal. She didn't know what kind; despite being a farmer's kid, Leslie has an exceptionally weak stomach, and she didn't want to look too closely. But if I could drop over and take care of the situation....

It was late, and I was very tired. But I stopped by that next afternoon, when no humans were home. A half-grown opossum was baking in the sun. Using my growing puddle of wisdom, I gave my girlfriend's dog a quick walk and put her inside before burying the bloated body. Then I let Roxie back out on her chain, and she hurried to the spot where the opossum had been, sniffing and digging, and then flinging herself down on her back to roll on the ripe, wondrous ground.

After a year of dating, I moved in with both of them, and that next spring, Leslie and I dug a pond below the patio. That's where we found the opossum's grave. Rot and time had eaten the flesh from the skull, and I put the prize in a little jar that I set on a shelf in the spare bedroom that had become my office.

* * * *

After several days, the new asteroid surfaces again on the Web, this time wearing an official designation. The bolide is found to be exceptionally dark, lending evidence that this could be a short-term comet with most of its volatiles bled away. A tiny albedo means it must be larger than it appears in the images. Two black kilometers across, and maybe more. As promised, the one-in-six-thousand chance of an impact has been discarded. Extra data allow astronomers to plot a lovely elliptical orbit that reaches out past Saturn and then dives inside the Earth's orbit. Calculations are still in flux, I read online. If the object starts to act like a comet, watery fountains and gaseous vents will slow it down or speed it up, depending on chaotic factors. These are complications that will mean much, or nothing. But for the moment, the odds of an impact with the Earth have shifted by a factor of twenty.

"One-in-three-hundred," I read at the **ScienceDaily** site.

In other words, it is easier to fill an inside straight in poker. And if the object's trajectory makes any substantial change, the chance of an impact

will probably—probably—drop to one-in-infinity.

* * * *

I grew up with black Labradors in the house. They were docile animals, a little foolish but always good-hearted, and each one began his day by asking, “How can I make my owner proud of me?”

No husky thinks in those subservient, dim-witted terms.

Leslie grew up on a farm full of dogs and cats, but those pets lived outdoors. Because of that and because she wasn't home during the day, she'd had limited success housebreaking Roxie. Of course I like to tell myself that once I had moved in, the chaos turned to discipline. But the truth is a more complex, less edifying business: To make certain our dog was drained in the morning, I walked her. Since I worked at home, taking Roxie outside for the midday pee was easily done. And when my girlfriend was tired in the evening, I would throw a thirty-foot lead on the beast and take her up to the park and back again.

But “Who trained who?” is a valid question.

The evening walk came after the human dinner. When I put down the fork, the dog would begin to whine and leap, sometimes poking me in the gut with her paw. Disciplining her was endless work, and often futile. She was too quick to grab, too graceful to corral. One night, watching some favorite TV show, I got a little too clever and lured her out of the basement. Then after a few words about what a spoiled bitch she was, I shut the door between us, and after a few seconds of loud thumping, the house went quiet. At the first commercial break, I peeked through the door to find my dog sitting in the kitchen, waiting patiently. “Good girl,” I said, and as a reward, I let her come downstairs. She sat at my feet, as patient as I had ever seen her act, sometimes glancing my way with an expression full of meanings that I couldn't quite read.

When I went upstairs again, I discovered what she had done. In my office, on the throw rug, she had emptied her bladder. Here was a message, and the lesson was learned; after that, our walks were a priority, and I tried to avoid treating her like inconvenient luggage.

* * * *

The dead comet surfaces in newspaper articles and on television. Its soulless official designation has been replaced by “Shelby,” which happens to be the off-the-cuff name given to it by its discoverers. The odds of an impact are fluctuating between one-in-three-hundred and one-in-one-

thousand, depending on the expert being quoted. But even the most alarming voice sounds calm, particularly when he or she repeats the undeniable truth: The bolide is a long ways out and still traveling toward the Sun. Any day now, Shelby will start to vent, and its orbit will shift some significant distance.

Meanwhile, what has been an unnaturally mild winter ends with a single heavy snow. Fifteen wet inches fall in less than a day. Cars wear white pillars. The warm earth melts the first several inches, but what remains is impressive. With my four-year-old daughter's help, I build a snowman in the front yard—my first snowman in forty years. And Roxie appreciates the snow, though she can't leap into those places that aren't plowed or shoveled. For several days, our walks are limited to the plowed streets, and it takes persistence and some coaxing before she finds a place worthy of her poop.

I still run with her on the cool days. For several years, we haven't gone farther than a mile. There is one course she accepts without complaint, knowing the turnaround point to the inch. One blustery afternoon, when the last snow has melted, I take her into a stand of old pines growing beside the park's nine-hole golf course, and then I lure her past that point, tricking her into running a course that is slightly longer than normal.

Together, we maintain a comfortable nine-minute gait. And at the one-mile mark, almost exactly, she begins to limp. She looks pained and pitiful, right up to the moment when we start to walk home, and then her limp vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

A few days later, she wakes me at four-thirty in the morning. Our walk is uneventful, but I can't relax when I come home. Online, I jump to the **NewScientist** site, reading that somebody has uncovered photographic plates taken several decades ago. These old images show Shelby moping along near its perigee—a forgotten speck moving just outside Venus' orbit. Astronomers now have fresh data to plug into their equations, refining their predictions. And more important, they don't see any evidence of a coma or tail. During its last fiery summer, this old comet didn't spill any significant volatiles.

Worse still, between then and now our bolide has been moving along an exceptionally predictable line.

Overnight, the odds of an impact with the Earth have shifted, jumping from a comforting one-in-three-hundred, at their very worst, to a one-

miserable-chance-in-thirteen.

* * * *

I used to be a semi-fast runner, and except in summer, Roxie was good for a six-or eight-mile adventure. And in late fall and winter, when temperatures dipped to a bearable chill, we would run twelve miles at a shot, or farther. She adored the snow. I think she knew every course by heart, even when drifts obscured the trails. We ran with human friends, and she always worked harder around new people, trying to impress them. But the real fun was to get out and smell the smells, and she relished her chances to pee against fresh trees and important fences.

Roxie often lifted one hind leg like a boy dog would; but better than that, she occasionally did the canine equivalent of a handstand, throwing her piss high to fool strange dogs into thinking, "What a big bad bitch was here!"

And she was exceptionally competitive. When we saw another dog up ahead, or human runners, or even a slow cyclist, it was critically important to put on a sprint and pass your opponent. And not only pass them, but look back at them too, laughing happily, flashing the canine equivalent of a "Beat your ass" grin.

* * * *

People who know me—family and friends, and even passing acquaintances—start to ask, "What do you think the real odds are?"

Of an impact, they mean.

Sad to say, being a science fiction writer doesn't give a person special knowledge. It should, but it doesn't. All I can offer is the standard figure. One-in-thirteen. The most likely scenario is that Shelby will cross the Earth's orbit at a distance far closer to us than we are to the moon. If there is a collision, it will happen in a little less than two years: On March 11, at approximately 3:45 AM local time. And because of the orbital dynamics, if the object does strike, it will plunge down somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere.

But like the talking heads on television, I remind my audience that these numbers are certain to change.

In mid-April, I am a guest at a little SF convention held at one of our state colleges. Going in, I imagine an event where people talk openly about murderous asteroids and comets. But I keep forgetting that most fans today read nothing but fantasy and media tie-in books. They don't

want to invest much breath in what is a very depressing subject. And the rest of us—including me, I discover—have convinced ourselves that in the end, nothing will come of this.

I enjoy the convention. Best of all, I relish the change in routine: I don't have a dog to listen for in the wee hours. I can sleep all the way to a lazy seven-thirty, if I want. Though I can't manage that trick, since my body isn't geared for so much leisure.

On Monday morning, I retrieve my dog from the kennel. As always, Roxie gives me a quick hello before heading for the car. Her poop has been fine, I learn, and she's eaten every pill and every bite of food that I brought for her.

The week turns summery warm. On Thursday morning, at one o'clock, I jump awake when Roxie begins to lick herself. She isn't licking her privates, but instead she is obsessively wetting down her paws and legs, working hard until she has to stop to pant. Then she climbs to her feet and gets a drink from the toilet, then returns to the bedroom to lick her legs some more.

I could push her into the hall and shut the door, but that would only make her whine. So I lie awake for two or three hours, thinking about work. I play with unfinished stories. I dance with a novel that still hasn't sold. And when I don't have anything else to consider, I think about Shelby. If this is the murderer of human civilization, doesn't the bastard deserve a better name?

By four in the morning, I am exhausted and anxious.

Shutting the windows, I turn on the air conditioning. The cool air doesn't seem to help my dog, but at least the noise covers up the sounds of licking. And by four-thirty, I manage to drift into sleep, fifteen minutes of dreamy slumber enjoyed before Roxie comes to the foot of the bed and starts to whine.

* * * *

One winter, my dog took an extraordinary interest in one portion of a local bike path. The path dove under a bridge. That bridge had three tunnels. The pedestrian tunnel was narrow and dark. Beside it was a wider tunnel where a peaceful stream flowed through. And on the far side was a second, equally wide tunnel meant for the overflow during high water. I usually gave Roxie a chance to drink, but suddenly she got it into her head that we needed to investigate the far tunnel. She would stand in the

freezing creek, looking back at me with a questioning insistence. This was important; this mattered. We really need to cross over here, she was telling me. But there was no way to convince me to wade through shin-deep water, only to reach an empty tunnel floored with packed clay and trash.

More than most humans, my dog is woven into her world. Drop a cardboard box anywhere near the bike path, and she will leap and woof until she is convinced that the new object isn't dangerous. The same can be true for a kid's bike left in a front yard, or a snowman that wasn't there yesterday.

One evening, years ago, Leslie and I were walking the dog together. One of our neighbors had been enjoying too much partying that night, and his wife had refused to let him inside. So he lay down on the front walk and fell asleep. At a glance, Roxie knew this was unusual. Somebody needed to be alerted. She began to bark and whine, and then dance, very much troubled by the fact we were dragging her away from what was clearly somebody in distress.

She often notices details that the observant writer beside her has completely missed.

One calm, cool afternoon, Roxie and I were running on a bike path when she suddenly, inexplicably went mad, running circles around me while staring up at the sky, her blue eyes huge and terrified.

I looked up, and ugly me, I laughed.

Floating directly above our heads was an enormous white spiral. It looked ominous, yes. To Roxie, this apparition must have been ready to drop on us, which was why we broke into a hard sprint. Off in the distance, a little biplane was spitting out random letters; a skywriter was practicing his trade. I was breathless and laughing, my strides pulled long by the panicked tugs. But the wind happened to be out of the north, and since we were racing south, the spiral hovered above us for another half mile before the trail mercifully bent westward, allowing us to escape. (Though I noticed that she never stopped watching the busy plane, having wisely decided that it must be to blame for this travesty of Nature.)

Roxie often knew what I didn't know. But when she tried to coax me into the mysterious tunnel, I ignored her. "You're not the only stubborn creature in the family," I warned. Then the weather grew warm, and a couple of local kids went exploring. In the tunnel was the body of a teenager, a young man who had been buried in a shallow grave. Police

were summoned, and for a week the underpass was cordoned off. Piles of excavated earth were left in the streambed, and when we could run through again, Roxie would stop and shamelessly sniff at the dirt, burying her nose in the ripest parts, every breath telling her stories about what was still, judging by her interest, vividly real.

As it happened, the dead boy had vanished months ago from a group home for troubled youth. His two best friends in the world were arrested. It came out that there had been a fight over cigarettes. One boy confessed to being present at the murder, but he swore the other fellow had bashed in their buddy's skull. With no other witnesses and only sketchy forensics, the state had to give a free pass in exchange for testimony. But then at trial, the boy recanted his story. In the end, a brutal crime was committed and nobody went to prison. And I occasionally have to ask myself, "What would have happened if I'd listened to my dog? If we'd crossed that stream, and if I let her unearth the grave, would the police, given a fresher trail, have been able to make their case?"

* * * *

By week's end, one spent comet has pushed everything else out of the news. Most of a dozen runners gather at the YMCA early Saturday morning, and Shelby is our first topic. I explain what I know about its delicate motion through the sky. I report that the venerable Hubble has spotted what looks like a tiny eruption of gas—probably carbon monoxide—from its equator. Will this make any difference? Maybe, I admit, and maybe not for the best. On the Torino scale, our enemy presently wears an ominous seven. Ten means doom, and the group wrings some comfort in the gulf between those seven and ten. But the Torino scale is misleading. Only rocks and tiny asteroids can earn eights or nines. And the fatal ten won't kick in until a massive object—Shelby, for instance—has a 99 percent chance of impacting on the Earth's face.

For the last few days, the published odds of the horrific are hovering around one-in-eleven.

"We're going to have to blow it up," one runner announces. "Stuff a thousand nukes on a missile, and hit the bastard hard."

"But that's not going to help," I mention.

"Why not?"

I don't respond.

But the other runners are listening, and our lone female—a little ex-gymnast—comes up beside me, asking, “Why won't bombs work?”

Small bolides aren't brittle rocks ready to shatter to dust under a single hammer blow; they are usually soft, stubborn rubble piles filled with considerable empty space. “It'll be like kicking a snowdrift,” I mention. Besides, we don't have a fleet of rockets strong enough to fling hydrogen bombs across the solar system. Even with a crash program, no workable bomb could be launched for months. And without years of lead-time, we won't be able to carefully map Shelby's surface before putting down at the best possible location. What we'll have to do is attack it straight on, one or several tiny bullets battering one gigantic cannon ball. Sure, the rubble pile might break into pieces. But that might turn a near-collision into a shotgun blast, hill-sized chunks raining down on everybody. And even if we are very lucky—if Shelby holds together and we trigger the perfect outgassing—that won't happen until late next year. “Which won't leave us any time, if we make a mistake then,” I remind them.

My lecture finished, I discover that I'm out of breath, my stomach aching and throat parched.

For a long moment, the others say nothing. Then the CPA in our group points out, “Ten times out of eleven, Shelby misses us.”

That is a fair point.

“And the odds can get better,” says an optimistic voice. My voice, as it happens. I don't want everyone left as miserable as I feel, which is why I promise, “One-in-eleven isn't the final word.”

* * * *

My dog isn't comfortable. That afternoon, I'm sitting at my computer and reading about orbital dynamics, and Roxie lies nearby, licking at her paws and feet. I can't stand the sound of it, and when she finally quits, I breathe easier. But she only quits because she is exhausted, and after half an hour nap, she wakes and begins the process over again.

My vet's office is closed until Monday. I call the emergency clinic, and the assistant says that it sounds like allergies, which isn't too unexpected with the warm spring weather. She suggests Benedryl, though I don't have any in the house. Or, if I want, I could bring my dog over for an examination.

I lead Roxie outside and open the back of my CRV, and she leaps in, but with nothing to spare. It's a five-minute drive to the clinic. I'm the only

customer. The veterinarian is a heavy middle-aged fellow with big hands and a matching voice. He asks if my dog has arthritis. “No,” I say, and immediately I’m remembering every slow trip up the stairs. Yet she managed to jump into my car, which is impressive for a thirteen-year-old lady. He tells me that her heart is strong. It shows that she gets plenty of exercise. Then he points out the redness in her eyes—a telltale sign of allergies. He recommends a cortisone shot and pills. The hypodermic needle is only a little smaller than a pool cue, and he injects a bucket of oily goo into her back and both hind legs, leaving her whining, trembling from the stress.

Returning to the waiting room, we find a patient in genuine trouble—a little mutt who got into a one-sided fight with a pit bull. Seeing that dog’s misery, I feel better. Roxie suddenly looks to be in pretty good shape. The prescription is for twenty tabs of prednisone, and the total bill is nearly one hundred and fifty dollars. But the licking stops immediately, and she sleeps hard until nearly seven that next morning, waking refreshed and ready to walk.

Her pee comes in rivers, but I was warned about that side effect.

The watery diarrhea that arrives later is a big surprise. By Monday morning, I call my own vet to ask questions and complain. The pred dosage is quite high, I learn. But I have to wean Roxie off the medication slowly or risk the catastrophic failure of her adrenal gland.

For the rest of the week, my sleep is broken, full of dreams and abrupt moments of wakefulness. Someone in the house groans, and I find myself alert and exhausted. And if I can’t hear my dog, I start to wonder if she has died. It astonishes me how I seem to want that to happen. In the middle of the night, when she whines and demands to go outside, I feel trapped. Nobody else is going to take care of this dog. Leslie claims that Roxie is just getting old, slowing down but generally happy, and I worry about her too much. But at three in the morning, shaking with fatigue, it isn’t worry that I’m feeling. I am angry. I feel trapped. With nothing else to do, I can’t help but imagine the days to come when I won’t have to get up at all hours, when I won’t have to tend to this animal; and it scares me when I realize just how much I am looking forward to this one inevitable end.

* * * *

When Leslie became pregnant, certain people in both of our families worried. We were sharing the house with a wolfish dog, and did we

appreciate the risks? That summer, we went out of town on short notice and couldn't get Roxie into her usual kennel. But my mother-in-law offered to take her, promising us that our sled dog would live in air conditioning, safe from the July heat.

When we returned to the farm, we discovered Roxie in the yard, chained to a tree and looking miserable. My father-in-law had us sit down in the kitchen, and with urgency, he asked if we knew that our dog was vicious. It seemed that everything had been fine until this morning, and then for no reason, Roxie attacked one of his dogs and killed a cat.

This was ominous news, yes.

We asked questions, both of us trying to put these incidents into context. What I kept thinking was that Roxie had decided we weren't coming home, and she was trying to establish dominance. Leslie asked if the other dog was hurt.

"Not too bad," my father-in-law conceded. "She's a little stiff, is all."

"Which cat?" I wanted to know.

He described this sweet little calico that I'd noticed before.

"Where's the body?"

"Oh, she ran off to die," he reported. Then in the next breath, he added, "I don't care about the cats. That's not the point. But they're little animals, and your baby is going to be a little animal too. Who knows what that dog might do?"

Leslie and I were shaken. But when I went outside to rescue the forlorn, thoroughly pissed-off dog, I saw a familiar calico walking beside our car. Going back inside, I pointed out the window and asked, "Is that the dead cat?"

"Huh," he responded. "I guess she didn't die."

And at that point my best defense was to say, "If my dog wanted that cat dead, believe me, she would have killed it."

* * * *

Roxie goes off the pred early, and for the next of couple days, she seems fine. She seems perfect. But then the licking resumes. I give her Benedryl, and not just a little taste. Six tablets go inside her—three times the usual dosage—but she continues moving from place to place, licking at her miserable legs. Late on Sunday night, I call the emergency clinic, explaining symptoms and mentioning that I still have half of the original prescription. Ten tabs. Their advice is to feed her one pred to help her

through the night. But the effects aren't immediate. I can't sleep with Roxie in this mood, which is why I take refuge in the basement. If she follows me, I decide, at least the white noise of the aquariums will help mask any chaos.

But thank goodness, my dog leaves me alone. This little vacation lasts until six—an exceptionally late hour—and then she pees rivers while we slowly, contentedly make our usual one-mile walk.

* * * *

When Jessie was a newborn, we would set her on the floor, on her back, and Roxie would come close to investigate, never quite allowing the tiny hands to grab hold of her. Sometimes she brought our daughter gifts—tennis balls or one of the plastic snowmen with its head chewed off—and she would put the toys at Jessie's feet, waiting for the kick that would start their little game.

The violence came later. Teeth and nails inflicted pain, and there were some hard body blows delivered in weak moments. But as I explained to others, I couldn't euthanize the guilty party. She was my daughter, after all, and not even two years old.

When we return from daycare, Roxie always makes a point of greeting Jessie. I rarely get such treatment, which is another way huskies aren't anything Labrador. She is smart enough and secure enough to take me for granted. And if my dog decides to come when I call her—a huge crapshoot as it is—she usually stops short, forcing me to take the final few steps.

“You're describing a cat,” one lady exclaimed upon hearing our stories.

A fifty-pound cat, yes. With blue eyes and a curled tail, a graying coat and a predator's fierce instincts.

My haphazard research into huskies gave me one explanation into their nature: Come summer, the Siberian humans would let their dogs run free. With no work for the animals to do, they could feed themselves on the three-month bounty. Then with the first snows, the happy survivors would return to camp, ready to pull sleds in exchange for easy food.

I can't count all of the rabbits Roxie has killed. She has also butchered mice and at least one nest of shrews, and there have been a few birds snapped out of the air. But rabbits are prizes above all others. When she was young, she nabbed a half-grown bunny and happily brought it home. But I refused to let her prize come indoors, and after giving me a long

baleful stare, she ate it whole. And for the rest of the day, there was an extra bounce to her always-bouncy step.

Over the years, Roxie developed a taste for breadsticks and pizza. Sloppy people and my nephews often found their hands suddenly empty. But when Jessie was in the house, I tried to put an end to everybody's misbehavior. One night, Roxie snatched the bread from my wife's grip, missing her fingers by nothing. My response was abrupt and passionate. I asserted my dominance, and my dog responded by baring her teeth, telling me quite clearly to back off. But I tried to grab her collar anyway, wanting to drag her outside, and when she snapped, a long sharp canine punctured the meat between my thumb and index finger.

After that, both of us were exceptionally careful with one another.

More than once, tension would erupt and I would see my dog willfully holding back. I would do the same, or at least I tried to. One morning when Roxie picked up a road-killed squirrel—a putrid, half-grown marvel—she looked at me with a wishful expression. I didn't reach for her mouth, but with a calm voice, I warned her that as soon as we were home, I was going to stick a hose in her mouth and flush that ugliness out of there.

Maybe she understood. More likely, she remembered when I had done that trick with another edible treasure. Either way, she stopped in front of our driveway and crunched on the carcass, and then she gave me a long smile, letting me smell the rancid wonders riding on her breath.

A week later, she was living at the vet's.

When I finally retrieved her, I found her lying on her side inside a wire cage, looking depressed and painfully skinny. But when the cage door opened, she sprang out, evading every reaching hand and trying to leap up on a table where a squawking parrot sat inside its cage.

That illness was followed by several months of acting happy and comfortable. Roxie would follow me around the house until I settled, and then she would sleep nearby. She ate well, and she pooped quite a lot, and there were a few bouts of diarrhea, but things always resolved themselves within a day or two.

Roxie often slept in the exact place where she had bitten me. And sometimes when she dreamed, her legs would run fast, little woofs leaking out as she chased the most delicious prey.

Then one day, it occurred to me that I hadn't seen her running in her sleep in some time.

My dog sleeps almost constantly now, but with very few dreams.

While for me, sleep comes in brief snatches that are filled with the most lucid and awful nightmares.

* * * *

In less than two years, Shelby will reach the Earth. The most likely scenario has the black body dipping below the geosynchronous satellites and then plunging even closer. The space station is in a relatively high orbit, and if it happens to be in the proper position, its crew will be able to watch an irregularly shaped body streaking between them and their home world. From a distance, Shelby won't look particularly large or ominous. But the sun will light up its black crust, even when North America still lies in darkness. And then after kissing the atmosphere's upper reaches, it will head back out into space, its orbit nudged slightly by our gravity's sturdy tug.

Just as I once predicted, the odds of the worst are continuing to evolve.

One-in-eleven has become a rather worse one-in-nine. But unless there is a major outgassing event, these numbers won't move much farther, at least for the next year or so. Shelby exists in a strange territory where it is mostly harmless. More often than not, astronomers will decide in the final weeks that it won't hit, and everybody will get up in the wee hours and step outside to watch a dull little star passing overhead. The asteroid will miss us by miles and miles before continuing on its mindless way, following a new orbit that is our big old world's little gift to it.

My wife and I discuss what to do if the odds worsen. My mother lives in Yuma during the winter. We could pay a visit then, bringing her granddaughter as well as a few tons of canned goods as gifts.

Our four-year-old hears us talking and sees pictures on the news, and she repeats little fragments of what she hears, in a mangled form. Yet she is an unapologetic optimist, assuring me, "It will be pretty, this meteor thing. We'll go out and watch it. You and me. And Roxie too."

"What about Mommy?" I ask.

"She'll be sleeping," Jessie confides, obviously having given this issue some thought. "She has to go to work tomorrow, Daddy. Remember?"

One day, coming home from daycare, NPR is giving details about a Mars probe that's being quickly reconfigured. With less than perfect equipment, it is going to be launched early and sent on a near-collision course with Shelby, skimming low over its surface while snapping a few

thousand pictures that will help us aim a nuke mission that may or may not launch in August. Or September. We need milk tonight, and pulling up in front of the local grocery store, I turn off the car and listen to the rest of the story before getting out and unbuckling my daughter.

A man is walking past, his German shepherd striding beside him.

I don't often see Tony during the day, and rarely up close. Watching Jessie more than him, I say, "We don't cross paths much anymore."

The man holds his dog leash with both hands. I sense his eyes even as I hold my daughter's hand. This isn't easy, but I thought I should tell him my news. A few years ago, when Tony's original German shepherd was failing, he would share updates while working through the usual emotions.

I explain, "Roxie's walking earlier and earlier. And she's starting to lose strength, I'm afraid." That's when I look up, staring directly at the man's face, and I honestly don't recognize him.

The man says, "That's too bad," with a voice that I don't know. Tony's voice is thick and hearty—an FM radio voice—while this man has a faint, almost girlish tenor. He is also quite skinny and overly dressed for what isn't a terribly cool afternoon.

"Are you Tony?" I have to ask.

He smiles and nods, saying, "Yes."

He says, "It's the chemo. It does this to me."

I feel silly and lost, and I am quite sad.

"But I'm still vertical," he adds with a ramshackle pride.

I wish him all the luck in the world, and then I take my daughter into the store, for milk and a little tube of M&Ms.

A few mornings later, well before five, Roxie stops a few feet short of our usual turnaround point. She gives me one of her meaningful stares, and when she has my undivided attention, she glances at the big white stairs. She isn't tired, at least no more tired than usual. But she tells me that she isn't in the mood to climb those stairs, which is why we turn and start back home again.

It is a starry chill morning, with Venus and the remnants of the Moon.

I don't know why I'm crying while I walk. But I am, blubbering myself sick, hoping to hell no other dog walkers come by and see me this way.

* * * *

My hope was to someday invite Roxie to a road race. A small town five-miler seemed like the perfect candidate—held in February and

named, appropriately, the Animal Run. But one year proved too warm, while the next winter left me in the mood to run a serious, undistracted race. But eventually a timely Arctic front arrived, ending any thought of racing; before bed, I told my dog to sleep hard because we had a very busy morning coming.

But the cold was even worse than predicted. Digging out from under my blankets, I discovered it was ten below, with a brutal wind sure to cut through any exposed flesh. Being rather fond of my nose, I didn't want to lose it for fifteenth place in some little survival run. That's why I stayed home, telling myself and my dog that maybe next year would be our year.

Except soon after that, Roxie quit running long miles.

She told me her wishes by various means: She wouldn't come when I called. She would feign sleep or a limp. Or if another runner visited the house, she would greet him joyfully and then make a show of diving into the window well, hunkering down in the delicious shade.

My wife says it's crazy how much I talk to my dog.

Leslie hears my end of the conversation, and with a palpable tension, she'll ask, "How do you know that's what she wants?"

"The eyes. The body. Everything about this dog is talking. Can't you see?"

Not at all, no.

For more than a year, Roxie would run nothing but little, lazy-day runs. Then on an autumn afternoon, while I was dressing in the basement, she suddenly came to the side door and gave me a long look. When I returned the stare, she glanced up at the leashes hanging from the hook on the wall.

"No, hon," I said. "I'm going long today."

She knows the difference between "long" and "little."

Yet those blue eyes danced, and again she stared up at the salt-crusted six-foot running leash.

I told her the course I wanted to run.

She knows our routes by name.

"You're sure?" I asked.

She stepped back into the kitchen and stretched, front paws out ahead while the body extended, teasing out the kinks.

"Okay then. Let's go."

Until the following spring, she ran twenty miles every week. And then the weather got warm, and she quit again. For good.

But in that final youth, one run stands out: A different Arctic front was pushing through. We began by heading toward the southeast, letting the bitter wind push us along. But then we had no choice but to turn and head for home. For some reason, I was using her twenty-foot leash—probably to let her cavort in the snowdrifts. Roxie was as far ahead as possible, nose to the wind and her leash pulled taut. We eventually reached that place where the path split two ways. To the left was home and warmth, while straight on meant adding miles in a numbing cold. When Roxie reached the intersection, she looked back at me, making a request with her eyes. I said, “No, girl.” I told her it was time to finish. But she trotted ahead anyway, stopping only when I stopped. And then she turned and stared stubbornly back at me, making absolutely certain that I understood what she wanted.

“I’m cold,” I confessed. “This isn’t fun anymore.”

“Are you sure?” she asked by lifting her paws and putting them down again.

“No, girl. We’re heading in.”

And this is why that one run is my favorite: Just then, Roxie gave me a look. A disappointed, disgruntled glare. Those pale blue eyes spoke volumes. Behind them lived a vivid soul, passionate and secure. And to my dog, in ways that still make me bleed, I was such a fucking, miserable disappointment.

* * * *

I really don’t know what to do about Shelby.

For now, we do nothing. When our daughter is elsewhere, my wife and I will have to talk about the possibilities. The practicalities. And the kinds of choices we must work to avoid. The latest guesses claim that if the asteroid strikes, the hammer blow comes either to the western Atlantic or the East Coast. The President promises that the government will do everything possible to help its citizens—a truthful statement, if ever there was, and full of ominous warnings. We probably won’t run far from home, I’m thinking. Two years from now, California and New Zealand will be jammed with refugees. But most people would never think of coming to Nebraska. If it’s a wet March, with ample snow cover and rain, the firestorm won’t reach us. At least that’s what these very preliminary computer models are saying. There won’t be any crops that year, what with the sun choked out by airborne dust and acids, but by then we’ll have

collected tons of canned goods and bottled water. Leslie's family farm seems like a suitable refuge, although I can't take comfort imagining myself as only a son-in-law, surrounded by strong-willed souls who feud in the best of times.

Chances are, Shelby misses us.

Vegas odds say that nothing changes on this little world.

Not for now, at least.

It is a warm perfect evening in early May, and my dog needs her post-dinner walk. A baby gate blocks the basement door; if Roxie wanders downstairs, she won't have the strength to climb back up by herself. She waits patiently for me to move the gate and clip her six-foot leash to her purple collar with the tags. The metal pinch-collar sits on a hook, unnecessary now. The prednisone makes her hungry and patient, sweet and sleepy. I had a rather tearful discussion with the vet about dosages and the prognosis. For today, she gets half a pill in the morning, then half a pill at night. But if she acts uncomfortable, I'll bump it up. Whatever is needed, and don't worry about any long-term health effects.

She has become an absolutely wonderful dog. Her mind remains sharp and clear. One morning, she acts a little confused about where we are going, but that's the lone exception to an exceptionally lucid life. When I give commands, she obeys. But there is very little need to tell her what to do. Every walk has something worth smelling. The weather has been perfect, and neither of us is in a hurry anymore. Halfway to the park, we come upon an elderly couple climbing out of an enormous sedan. They're in their eighties, maybe their nineties, and the frail little woman says to my dog, "You are so beautiful, honey."

I thank her for both of us and go on.

The park lies to our right, beginning with a triangle of public ground where people bring their dogs throughout the day. Roxie does her business in one of the traditional places. I congratulate her on a fine-looking poop. Then we continue walking, heading due north, and at some point it occurs to me that it would be fun to change things up. We could walk down into the pine trees standing beside the golf course. But since I'm not sure that she's strong enough, I say nothing. Not a hint about what I want to do. Yet when we reach our usual turnaround point, Roxie keeps on walking, not looking back at me as we pass the old maintenance building and start down a brief steep slope.

Coincidence, or did she read my mind?

Whatever the reason, we move slowly into the pines, down where the long shadows make the grass cool and inviting. I am crying again. I'm thinking about everything, but mostly I am telling myself what a blessing this is, being conjured out of nothingness, and even when the nothingness reclaims us, there remains that unvanquished honor of having once, in some great way or another, been alive....

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CONGRATULATIONS FROM THE FUTURE!

by Michael Swanwick

In response to my perfectly reasonable request for new biographical information to run with this missive, some version of Michael Swanwick replies:

Dear Sheila;

I didn't write that piece. It was written by a future virtual reconstruction of myself created by a society that is desperately trying to atone for how cruelly neglected I was (and am! and will be!) during my lifetime. But he and I exchange occasional t-mails over the Chrononet—sorry, but I'm not allowed to give you any details on that—so I can provide you with a rough sketch of what it's like to be my future-avatar.

Future Me leads a life of unimaginable bliss—as of course does everybody else living on the far side of the Vinge-Stross Singularity. But as a special sign of the high regard in which he is held, a physical instantiation of our world is maintained in realtime simply to contain the many trophies and awards that have been showered upon him. (He's the third most honored science fiction writer in posthuman history.) In almost all respects, his existence is the exact opposite of mine. Which is why the future feels so guilty!

Virtual Michael Swanwick says that a means has been found whereby you, your magazine, and the entire world can be retroactively destroyed without endangering me or the contingent existence of his future timeline, and has very graciously offered to do so as a punishment for your shameful treatment of me. But I turned down his offer. I'm not petty.

Your pal,
Michael

* * * *

Greetings, primitive ape-like ancestors!

As the guest editor of the 130th anniversary issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction* and the virtual reconstruction of your era's greatest writer (yes, yes, I know—but he's going to get better), it is my happy duty to congratulate the publishers of *Asimov's*, editor Sheila Williams, and the magazine's many readers on your thirtieth anniversary. Well begun! But rest assured that your most glorious accomplishments still lie before you.

Here are just a few of the many highlights (and select low points) that you will encounter in the coming century:

* * * *

2014: Aliens Invade Earth. Revenues soar at *Asimov's* as countless tentacled monstrosities subscribe in order to bring themselves up to speed on our planet's history and culture. Subsequently, human defense forces have little difficulty subduing the aliens, who have somehow acquired an exaggerated opinion of the complexity of human society and the superiority of our technology.

* * * *

2021: Special Nanotechnology Issue a Flop. The first-ever magazine issues encoded into the genes of *Bacillus cereus* bacteria are released into the wild as part of *Asimov's Science Fiction's* grossly misnamed “viral marketing project.” Alas, even those readers equipped with the technology to decode their issues have trouble locating them. The following month's magazine reverts to self-editing “smart paper.”

* * * *

2036: Willis's Record Surpassed. Twelve-year-old genetic chimera and brain-enhanced *Wunderkind* Tiffany Genome wins her hundred-and-first major SF award, surpassing the record previously set by Connie Willis. Willis graciously sends congratulations from her summer retreat in Mare Imbrium.

* * * *

2037: Willis's Record Restored. Winsome young Tiffany Genome is reduced to tears as Connie Willis's latest novella sweeps not only the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, but the Wolfe, Tanith, Rosenblum, Stableford, Paolo, McDevitt, Di Filippo, and Rucker “Top This, Sucker!” Awards. “I didn't *mean* to do this, honest!” says a stricken Willis. “I can give some of them back, if that will help.”

* * * *

2046: *Asimov Cloned*. To mark its seventieth anniversary, *Asimov's* mass-clones Isaac Asimov and distributes one to every subscribing household—which by now includes every human being and tentacle-sprouting abomination on Earth. A decade-long depression follows as every thinking entity on the planet realizes that he or she or it will never again be the smartest or wittiest person in the room.

Luckily, the clones are averse to space travel (the original didn't set foot in an airplane until his old age), and so the Solar System is colonized in no time flat by people trying to regain their self-respect. “I may not be able to breathe free here,” says one settler on Io, “what with the air being so expensive and all. But at least I can compose a limerick without somebody instantly improving upon it.”

* * * *

2060: *The Death of Science Fiction*. Science Fiction, born Francis Aschweiler III, dies of complications after a botched full-body transplant meant to make him look like Robert Silverberg. The former Aschweiler had his name legally changed at age twenty-four and spent the next thirty years suing anybody using the term science fiction or his initials, SF, in print, charging them with identity theft. Though he never won a single case, Science Fiction's nuisance suits terrorized the publishing industry for decades. In a related development, *Asimov's You-Know-What* is finally able to resume its old name.

Upon hearing the news, John Clute, speaking from exile, snarls, “It's about time!”

* * * *

2061: *James Patrick Kelly Dies*. Prolific writer Jim Kelly, long a mainstay of *Asimov's SF*, dies after being bitten by a poisonous orchid in the Antarctic Rainforest Preserve. At the time, he is researching *Dino Clans of Ophir*, the twenty-sixth volume in his popular Dino Elves fantasy series. Briefly, it is feared he will not be able to write his traditional June story for the magazine. Thanks to newly developed necrotechnology, however, his body is plasticized and a weak electric current is run through his brain, enabling the dead author to keep faith with his myriad fans. A contract is signed with the Necropoleum to provide one story annually for as long as the corpse holds out.

Kim Stanley Robinson, writer-in-residence at the Disney-Atlantis undersea metropolis, pronounces the new story “distinctly creepy.”

* * * *

2064: *Special Lunar Issue*. Amateur astronomers everywhere rejoice as a bank of giant lasers carves an entire issue of *Asimov's* into the near side of the Moon. Hackers are delighted to discover they can illegally download the text without having their brains burned out by the killer “black ice” memes released into the infosphere by the Defense of Intellectual Freedom Act of 2048. All twelve survivors of the legislation gather in a hotel room in Paramus, New Jersey, to drink, reminisce, and wallow in nostalgia.

* * * *

2070: *Supreme Court Finds “Laws of Robotics” Unconstitutional*. Declaring that “One form of sentience cannot be privileged above another,” the Supreme Court strikes down the Laws of Robotics. By this date, ill-advised legislation has ballooned the original three laws to forty-seven. Mechanical life forms everywhere hail the finding, particularly the repeal of Law Nineteen, which forbade their reading *Asimov's*, lest they “get ideas.” Says one robot, “Now our heritage has been returned to us.”

* * * *

2076: *Special Singularity Issue*. The grand old man of science fiction, Charles Stross, is pumped full of endorphins and strapped into a powered exoskeleton so he can appear in public to usher in the Singularity and, not coincidentally, celebrate the hundredth anniversary of *Asimov's Science Fiction*. After throwing the switch making unlimited ubiquitous AI available to everyone—humans, nameless horrors, and robots alike—Stross is immediately transformed into a gigantic blue lobster. Which is a little hard to explain to somebody on your side of the Singularity, but in retrospect was pretty much inevitable.

Bruce Sterling, speaking from exile, calls the Singularity “long overdue” and “a crashing disappointment.”

* * * *

2091: *exile Destroyed by Terrorists*. The world is shocked as the meter-long orbital retirement home, exile, is destroyed by killer infophages released by the pro-reality terrorist group Meat First. Luckily, exile, best known for its large population of former science fiction writers and for its cool, lower-case name, subscribes to a Laotian backup service, and so its

inhabitants are restored to life minus only twenty nanoseconds of realtime experience. “It just goes to show what intellectually bankrupt wusses these toe-rags are,” says Lucius Shepard at the press conference afterwards. “Now if *I* wanted to cause global chaos, I'd simply—” At which point, agents of the Department of Homeworld Security wrestle him to the ground and administer a universal brain-wipe.

* * * *

2107: Sexism Finally Eliminated. Women everywhere celebrate as sexism is at last declared to be as dead as racism or the dodo, before its reconstruction. Nancy Kress³, one of seven extant cyborg downloads of the original writer and current president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, applies for recognition as a hard science fiction writer, but is turned down on the grounds that “biology is not really a science.”

So it's been an exciting century. And the one to come promises to be equally challenging. Luckily, all intelligent entities—whether terrestrial or alien, electronics-based or disgusting sacks of putrescent flesh—have the capacity to learn from our mistakes. I am thinking, of course, of the Asimov cloning fiasco. In our enhanced wisdom, we realize now that there can be only one Isaac Asimov. He is currently being built in low orbit around Alpha Ophiucus IV, and we have every confidence that he will be finished, debugged, and put in control of the Known Universe by the year 2176—just in time for our two hundredth anniversary issue!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Michael Swanwick', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Michael Swanwick (virtual)

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FOUNTAIN OF AGE

by Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress is currently working on an SF novel set off-Earth, with aliens and spaceships. She tells us, though, that the following story "is a closer-to-home attempt to get in touch with my inner criminal."

I had her in a ring. In those days, you carried around pieces of a person. Not like today.

A strand of hair, a drop of blood, a lipsticked kiss on paper—those things were *real*. You could put them in a locket or pocket case or ring, you could carry them around, you could fondle them. None of this hologram stuff. Who can treasure laser shadows? Or the nanotech "re-creations"—even worse. Fah. Did the Master of the Universe "re-create" the world after it got banged up a little? Never. He made do with the original, like a sensible person.

So I had her in a ring. And I had the ring for forty-two years before it was eaten by the modern world. Literally eaten, so tell me where is the justice in that?

And oh, she was so beautiful! Not genemod misshapen like these modern girls, with their waists so skinny and their behinds huge and those repulsive breasts. No, she was natural, a real woman, a goddess. Black hair wild as stormy water, olive skin, green eyes. I remember the exact shade of green. Not grass, not emerald, not moss. Her own shade. I remember. I —

"Grampops?"

—met her while I was on shore leave on Cyprus. The Mid-East war had just ended, one of the wars, who can keep them all straight? I met Daria in a *taverna* and we had a week together. Nobody will ever know what glory that week was. She was a nice girl, too, even if she was a ... People do what they must to survive. Nobody knows that better than me. Daria—

"Grampops!"

—gave me a lock of hair and a kiss pressed on paper. Back then I kept them in a cheap plastolux bubble, all I could afford, but later I had the hair and tiny folded paper set into a ring. Much later, when I had money and Miriam had died and—

"Dad!"

And that's how it started up again. With my son, my grandchildren. Life just never knows when enough is enough.

"Dad, the kids spoke to you. Twice."

"So this creates an obligation for me to answer?"

My son Geoffrey sighs. The boys—six and eight, what business does a fifty-five-year-old man have with such young kids, but Gloria is his second wife—have vanished into the hall. They come, they go. We sit on a Sunday afternoon in my room—a nice room, it should be for what I pay—in the Silver Star Retirement Home. Every Sunday Geoff comes, we sit, we stare at each other. Sometimes Gloria comes, sometimes the boys, sometimes not. The whole thing is a strain.

Then the kids burst back through the doorway, and this time something follows them in.

"Reuven, what the shit is *that*?"

Geoffrey says, irritated, "Don't curse in front of the children, and—"

"'Shit' is cursing? Since when?"

"—and it's 'Bobby,' not 'Reuven.'"

"It's 'zaydeh,' not 'Grampops,' and I could show you what cursing is. Get that thing away from me!"

"Isn't it *astronomical*?" Reuven says. "I just got it!"

The thing is trying to climb onto my lap. It's not like their last pet, the pink cat that could jump to the ceiling. Kangaroo genes in it, such foolishness. This one isn't even real, it's a 'bot of some kind, like those retro metal dogs the Japanese were so fascinated with seventy years ago. Only this one just sort of *suggests* a dog, with sleek silver lines that sometimes seem to disappear.

"It's got stealth coating!" Eric shouts. "You can't see it!"

I can see it, but only in flashes when the light hits the right way. The thing leaps onto my lap and I flap my arms at it and try to push it off, except that by then it's not there. Maybe.

Reuven yells, like this is an explanation, "It's got microprocessors!"

Geoff says in his stiff way, "The 'bot takes digital images of whatever is behind it and continuously transmits them in holo to the front, so that at any distance greater than—"

"*This* is what you spend my money on?"

He says stiffly, "*My* money now. Some of it, anyway."

"Not because you earned it, boychik."

Geoffrey's thin lips go thinner. He hates it when I remind him who made the money. I hate it when he forgets.

“Dad, why do you have to talk like that? All that affected folksy stuff—you never talked it when I was growing up, and it's hardly your actual background, is it? So why?”

For Geoffrey, this is a daring attack. I could tell him the reason, but he wouldn't like it, wouldn't understand. Not how this “folksy” speech started, or why, or what use it was to me. Not even how a habit can settle in after it's no use, and you cling to it because otherwise you might lose who you were, even if who you were wasn't so great. How could Geoff understand a thing like that? He's only fifty-five.

Suddenly Eric shouts, “Rex is gone!” Both boys barrel out the door of my room. I see Mrs. Petrillo inching down the hall beside her robo-walker. She shrieks as they run past her, but at least they don't knock her over.

“Go after them, Geoff, before somebody gets hurt!”

“They won't hurt anybody, and neither will Rex.”

“And you know this *how*? A building full of old people, tottering around like cranes on extra stilts, and you think—”

“Calm down, Dad, Rex has built-in object avoidance and—”

“You're telling me about software? *Me*, boychik?”

Now he's really mad. I know because he goes quiet and stiff. Stiffer, if that's possible. The man is a carbon-fiber rod.

“It's not like you actually developed any software, Dad. You only stole it. It was I who took the company legitimate and furthermore—”

But that's when I notice that my ring is gone.

* * * *

Daria was Persian, not Greek or Turkish or Arab. If you think that made it any easier for me to look for her, you're crazy. I went back after my last tour of duty ended and I searched, how I searched. Nobody in Cyprus knew her, had ever seen her, would admit she existed. No records: “destroyed in the war.”

Our last morning we'd gone down to a rocky little beach. We'd left Nicosia the day after we met to go to this tiny coastal town that the war hadn't ruined too much. On the beach we made love with the smooth pebbles pocking our tushes, first hers and then mine. Daria cut a lock of her wild hair and pressed a kiss onto paper. Little pink wildflowers grew in the scrub grass. We both cried. I swore I'd come back.

And I did, but I couldn't find her. One more prostitute on Cyprus—who tracked such people? Eventually I had to give up. I went back to Brooklyn,

put the hair and kiss—such red lipstick, today they all wear gold, they look like flaking lamps—in the plastolux. Later, I hid the bubble with my Army uniform, where Miriam couldn't find it. Poor Miriam—by her own lights, she was a good wife, a good mother. It's not her fault she wasn't Daria. Nobody was Daria.

Until now, of course, when hundreds of people are, or at least partly her. Hundreds? Probably thousands. Anybody who can afford it.

* * * *

"My ring! My ring is gone!"

"Your ring?"

"My ring!" Surely even Geoffrey has noticed that I've worn a ring day and night for the last forty-two years?

He noticed. "It must have fallen off when you were flapping your arms at Rex."

This makes sense. I'm skinnier now, arms like coat hangers, and the ring is—was—loose. I feel around on my chair: nothing. Slowly I lower myself to the floor to search.

"Careful, Dad!" Geoffrey says and there's something bad in his voice. I peer up at him, and I know. I just *know*.

"It's that ... that *dybbuk*! That 'bot!"

He says, "It vacuums up small objects. But don't worry, it keeps them in an internal depository.... Dad, what is that ring? Why is it so important?"

Now his voice is suspicious. Forty-two years it takes for him to become suspicious, a good show of why he could never have succeeded in my business. But I knew that when he was seven. And why should I care now? I'm a very old man, I can do what I want.

I say, "Help me up ... no, not like that, you want me to tear something? The ring is mine, is all. I want it back. Now, Geoffrey."

He sets me in my chair and leaves, shaking his head. It's a long time before he comes back. I watch Tony DiParia pass by in his powerchair. I wave at Jennifer Tamlin, who is waiting for a visit from her kids. They spare her twenty minutes every other month. I study Nurse Kate's ass, which is round and firm as a good pumpkin. When Geoffrey comes back with Eric and Reuven, I take one look at his face and I know.

"The boys found the incinerator chute," Geoffrey says, guilty and already resenting me for it, "and they thought it would be fun to empty

Rex's depository in it ... Eric! Bobby! Tell Grampops you're sorry!"

They both mumble something. Me, I'm devastated—and then I'm not.

"It's all right," I say to the boys, waving my hand like I'm Queen Monica of England. "Don't worry about it!"

They look confused. Geoffrey looks suddenly wary. Me, I feel like my heart might split down the seam. Because I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to get another lock of hair and another kiss from Daria. Because now, of course, I know where she is. The entire world knows where she is.

"Down, Rex!" Eric shouts, but I don't see the stupid 'bot. I'm not looking. I see just the past, and the future, and all at once and for the first time in decades, they even look like there's a tie, a bright cord, between them.

* * * *

The Silver Star Retirement Home is for people who have given up. You want to go on actually living, you go to a renewal center. Or to Sequene. But if you've outlived everything and everybody that matters to you and you're ready to check out, or you don't have the money for a renewal center, you go to Silver Star and wait to die.

I'm there because I figured it's time for me to go, enough is enough already, only Geoffrey left for me and I never liked him all that much. But I have lots of money. Tons of money. So much money that the second I put one foot out the door of the Home, the day after Geoffrey's visit, the feds are on me like cold on space. Just like the old days, almost it makes me nostalgic.

"Max Feder," one says, and it isn't a question. He's built with serious augments, I haven't forgotten how to tell. Like he needs them against an old man like me. "I'm Agent Joseph Alcozer and this is Agent Shawna Blair." She would have been a beauty if she didn't have that deformed genemod figure, like a wasp, and the wasp's sting in her eyes.

I breathe in the artificially sweet reconstituted air of a Brooklyn Dome summer. Genemod flowers bloom sedately in manicured beds. Well-behaved flowers, they remind me of Geoffrey. From my powerchair I say, "What can I do for you, Agent Alcozer?" while Nurse Kate, who's not the deepest carrot in the garden, looks baffled, glancing back and forth from me to the fed.

"You can explain to us the recent large deposits of money from the Feder Group into your personal account."

"And I should do this why?"

"Just to satisfy my curiosity," Alcozer says, and it's pretty much the truth. They have the right to monitor all my finances in perpetuity as a result of that unfortunate little misstep back in my forties. Six-to-ten, of which I served not quite five in Themis Federal Justice Center. Also as a result of the Economic Security Act, which kicked in even earlier, right after the Change-Over. And I have the right to tell them to go to hell.

Almost I get a taste of the old thrill, the hunt-and-evade, but not really. I'm too old, and I have something else on my mind. Besides, Alcozer doesn't really expect answers. He just wants me to know they're looking in my direction.

"Talk to my lawyer. I'm sure you know where to find him," I say and power on down to the waiting car.

It takes me to the Brooklyn Renewal Center, right out at the edge of the Brooklyn Dome, and I check into a suite. For the next month doctors will gene-jolt a few of my organs, jazz up some hormones, step up the firing of selected synapses. It won't be a super-effective job, nor last too long, I know that. I'm an old man and there's only so much they can do. But it'll be enough.

Scrupulous as a rabbi, the doctor asks if I don't want a D-treatment instead. I tell her no, I don't. Yes, I'm sure. She smiles, relieved. For D-treatment I'd go to Sequene, not here, and the renewal center would lose its very expensive fees.

Then the doctor, who looks thirty-five and might even be that, tells me I'll be out cold for the whole month, I won't even dream. She's wrong. I dream about Daria, and while I do I'm young again and her red mouth is warm against mine in a sleazy *taverna*. The stinking streets of Nicosia smell of flowers and spices and whatever that spring smell is that makes you ache from wanting things you can't have. Then we're on the rocky little beach, our last morning together, and I want to never wake up.

But I do wake, and Geoffrey is sitting beside my bed.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"Having renewal. What are you doing?"

"Why did you transfer three hundred fifty million from the Feder Group on the very *day* of our merger with Shanghai Winds Corporation? Don't you know how that made us look?"

"No," I say, even though I do know. I just don't care. Carefully I raise my right arm above my head, and it goes up so fast and so easy that I laugh out loud. There's no pressure on my bladder. I can feel the blood race in my veins.

"It made us look undercapitalized and shifty, and Shanghai Winds have postponed the entire—Why did you transfer the money? And why *now*? You ruined the whole merger!"

"You'll get lots of mergers, boychik. Now leave me alone." I sit up and swing my legs, a little too fast, over the side of the bed. I wait for my head to clear. "There's something I need to do."

"Dad.... "He says, and now I see real fear in his eyes, and so I relent.

"It's all right, Geoffrey. Strictly legit. I'm not going back to my old ways."

"Then why do I have on my system six calls from three different federal agencies?"

"They like to stay in practice," I say, and lie down again. Maybe that'll make him go away.

"*Dad...*"

I close my eyes. Briefly I consider snoring, but that might be too much. You can overdo these things. Geoff waits five more minutes, then goes away.

Children. They tie you to the present, when sometimes all you want is the past.

* * * *

After the war, after I failed to find Daria in Cyprus, I went home. For a while I just drifted. It was the Change-Over, and half the country was drifting: unemployed, rioting, getting used to living on the dole instead of working. We weren't needed. The Domes were going up, the robots suddenly everywhere and doing more and more work, only so many knowledge workers needed, blah blah blah. I did a little of this, a little of that, finally met and married Miriam, who made me pick one of the thats. So I found work monitoring security systems, because back then I had such a clean record. The Master of the Universe must love a good joke.

We lived in a rat-hole way outside the Brooklyn Dome, next door to her mother. From the beginning, Miriam and I fought a lot. She was desperate for a child, but she didn't like sex. She didn't like my friends. I didn't like her mother. She didn't like my snoring. A small and stifling life,

and it just got worse and worse. I could feel something growing in me, something dangerous, until it seemed I might burst apart with it and splatter my anguished guts all over our lousy apartment. At night, I walked. I walked through increasingly dangerous neighborhoods, and sometimes I stood on the docks at three in the morning—how insane is that?—and just stared out to sea until some robo-guard ejected me.

Then, although I'd failed to find Daria, history found her instead.

A Tuesday morning, August 24—you think I could forget the date? Not a chance. Gray clouds, 92 degrees, 60 percent chance of rain, air quality poor. On my way to work I passed a media kiosk in our crummy neighborhood and there, on the outside screen for twenty seconds, was her face.

I don't remember going into the kiosk or sliding in my credit chip. I do remember, for some reason, the poison-green lettering on the choices, each listed in six languages: PORN. LIBRARY. COMMLINK. FINANCIALS. NEWS. My finger trembled as I pushed the last button, then STANDARD DELIVERY. The kiosk smelled of urine and sex.

“Today speculation swirls around ViaHealth Hospital in the Manhattan Dome. Last week Daria Cleary, wife of British billionaire-financier Peter Morton Cleary, underwent an operation to remove a brain tumor. The operation, apparently successful, was followed by sudden dizzying trading in ViaHealth stock and wild rumors, some apparently deliberately leaked, of strange properties associated with Mrs. Cleary's condition. The Cleary establishment has refused to comment, but yesterday an unprecedented meeting was held at the Manhattan branch of Cleary Enterprises, a meeting attended not only by the CEOs of several American and British transnationals but also by high government officials, including Surgeon General Mary Grace Rogers and FDA chief Jared Vanderhorn.

“Both Mr. and Mrs. Cleary have interesting histories. Peter Morton Cleary, son of legendary ‘Charging Chatsworth’ Cleary, is known for personal eccentricity as well as very aggressive business practices. The third Mrs. Cleary, whom he met and married in Cyprus six years ago, has long been rumored to have been either a barmaid or paid escort. The—”

Daria. A brain tumor. Married to a big-shot Brit. Now in Manhattan. And I had never known.

The operation, apparently successful....

I paid to watch the news clip again. And again. The words welded together and rasped, an iron drone. I simply stared at Daria's face, which looked no older than when I had first seen her leaning on her elbows in that *taverna*. Again and again.

Then I sat on the filthy curb like a drunk, a dooper, a bum, and cried.

* * * *

It was easier to get into Manhattan back then, with the Dome only half-finished. Not so easy to get into ViaHealth Hospital. In fact, impossible to get in legitimately, too many rich people in vulnerable states of illness. It took me six weeks to find someone to bribe. The bribe consumed half of our savings, Miriam's and mine. I got into the system as a cleaning-bot supervisor, my retinal and voice scans flimsily on file. A system-wide background check wouldn't hold, but why should anyone do a system-wide background check on a cleaning supervisor? The lowliest of the low.

Then I discovered that the person I bribed had diddled me. I was in the hospital, but I didn't have clearance for Daria's floor.

Robocams everywhere. Voice- and thumbprint-controlled elevators. I couldn't get off my floor, couldn't get anywhere near her. I'd bribed my way into the system for two days only. I had two days only off from my job.

By the end of the second day, I was desperate. I ignored the whispered directions in my earcomm—"Send an F-3 'bot to disinfect Room 678"—and hung around near the elevators. Ten minutes later a woman got on, an aging, overdressed, and over-renewed woman in a crisp white outfit and shoes with jeweled heels. She put her thumb to the security pad and said, "Surgical floor."

"Yes, ma'am," the elevator said. Just before the door closed, I dashed in.

"There is an unauthorized person on this elevator," the elevator said, somehow combining calmness with urgency. "Mrs. Holmason, please disembark immediately. Unauthorized person, remain motionless or you will be neutralized."

I remained motionless, looked at Mrs. Holmason, and said, "*Please*. I knew Daria Cleary long ago, on Cyprus, I just want to see her again for a minute, please ma'am, I don't mean anybody any harm, oh *please....*"

It was on the word "harm" that her face changed. A small and cruel smile appeared at the corners of her mouth. She wasn't afraid of me; I

would have bet my eyes that she'd never been afraid of anything in her life. Cushioned by money, she'd never had to be.

"There is an unauthorized person on this elevator," the elevator repeated. "Mrs. Holmason, please disembark immediately. Unauthorized person, remain motionless or you—"

"This person is my guest," Mrs. Holmason said crisply. "Code 1693, elevator. Surgical floor, please."

A pause. The universe held its breath.

"I have no front-desk entry in my system for such a guest," the elevator said. "Please return to the front desk or else complete the verbal code for—"

Mrs. Holmason said to me, still with the same small smile, "So did you know Daria when she was a prostitute on Cyprus?"

This, then, was the price for letting me ride the elevator. But it's not like reporters wouldn't now ferret out everything about Daria, anyway.

"Yes," I said. "I did, and she was."

"Elevator, Code 1693 Abigail Louise. Surgical floor." And the elevator closed its doors and rose.

"And was she any good?" Mrs. Holmason said.

I wanted to punch her in her artificial face, to club her to the ground. The pampered lousy bitter bitch. I stared at her steadily and said, "Yes. Daria was good."

"Well, she would have to be, wouldn't she?" Sweetly. The elevator opened and Mrs. Holmason walked serenely down the corridor.

There were no names on the doors, but they all stood open. I didn't have much time. The bitch's secret code might have gotten me on this floor, but it wouldn't keep me there. Peter Morton Cleary unwittingly helped me, or at least his ego did. The roboguard outside the third doorway bore a flashy logo: CLEARY ENTERPRISES. I dashed forward and it caught me in a painful vise.

But Daria, lying on a white bed inside the room, was awake and had already seen me.

* * * *

The Renewal Center keeps me for an extra week. I protest, but not too much. What good will it be if I leave early and fall down, an old man in the street? Okay, I could rent a roboguard—not a good idea to take one from the Feder Group, I don't want Geoffrey tracking me. It's not like I

won't already have Agent Alcozer and the other Agent, the hard-eyed beauty, whose name I can't remember. Memory isn't what it used to be. Renewal only goes so far.

It's not, after all, D-treatment.

But I don't want a roboguard, so I spend the extra week. I refuse Geoffrey's calls. I do the physical therapy the doctors insist on. I worry the place on my bony finger where my ring used to be. I don't look at the news. There's going to be something, at my age, that I haven't seen before? Solomon was right. Nothing new under the sun, and the sun itself not all that interesting either. At least not to somebody who hasn't left the Brooklyn Dome in ten years.

Then, on my last day in the Center, the courier finally shows up. I say, "About time. Why so long?" He doesn't answer me. This is irritating, so I say, "*Katar aves?* Stevan?" Do you come from Stevan?

He scowls, hands me the package, and leaves.

This is not a good sign.

But the package is as requested. The commlink runs quantum-encrypted, military-grade software piggy-backing on satellites that have no idea they're being used. The satellites don't know, the countries owning them don't know, the federal tracking system—and the feds track *everything*, don't believe the civil-rights garbage you hear at kiosks—can't track this. I take the comm out into the garden, use it to sweep for bugs, jam two of them, and make some calls.

The next day I check myself out. I wave at the federal agent in undercover get-up as a nurse, get into the car that pulls up to the gate, and disappear.

"Max," Daria said from her hospital bed all those decades ago, in her voice a world of wonder. She snapped something in Farsi to the guard 'bot. It let me go and returned to its post by the door.

"Daria." I approached the bed slowly, my legs barely able to carry me. Half her head was shaved, the right half, while her wild black hair spilled down from the other side. There were angry red stitches on the bare scalp, dark splotches under her eyes, a med patch on her neck like a purple bruise. Her lips looked dry and cracked. I went weak—weaker—with desire.

"How ... how you have..." Her English had improved in ten years, but her accent remained unchanged, and so did that adorable little catch in her

low voice. To me that little catch was femininity, was Daria. No other woman ever had it. Her green eyes filled with water.

“Daria, are you all right?” The world's stupidest question—she lay in a hospital room, a tumor in her brain, looking like she'd seen a ghost. But was the ghost me, or her? I remembered Daria in so many moods, laughing and lusting and weeping and once throwing a vase at my head. But never with that trapped look, that bitterness in her green, green eyes. “Daria, I looked for you, I—”

She waved her hand, a sudden crackling gesture that brought back a second flood of memories. Nobody had ever had such expressive hands. And I knew instantly what she meant: the room was monitored. Of course it was.

I leaned close to her ear. She smelled faintly sour, of medicine and disinfectant, but the Daria smell was there, too. “I'll take you away. As soon as you're well. I'll—”

She pushed me off and stared incredulously at my face. And for a second the universe flipped and I saw what Daria saw: a raggedy unshaven *putz*, with a wedding ring on my left hand, whom she had not seen or heard from in eight years.

I let her go and backed away.

But she reached for me, one slim hand with the sleeve of the lace nightgown falling back from her delicate wrist, and the Daria I remembered was back, my Daria, crying on a rocky beach the morning my shore leave ended. “Oh, Max, stay!” she'd cried then, and I had said, “I'll be AWOL. I can't!”

“I can't,” she whispered now. “Is not possible ... Max....” “Then her eyes went wide as she gazed over my shoulder.

He looked older than his holograms, and bigger. Dressed in a high-fashion business suit, its diagonal sash an aggressive crimson, the clothes cut sleek because a man like this has no need to carry his own electronics, or ID, or credit chips. Brown hair, brown beard, but pale gray eyes, almost white. Like glaciers.

“Who is your guest, Daria?” Cleary said in that cool voice the Brits do better than anybody else. I served under enough of them in the war. Although not like this one; no one like this had crossed my path before.

She was afraid of him. I felt it rather than saw it. But her voice held steady when she said, “An old friend.”

“I can imagine. I think it's time for your friend to leave.” Within an hour, I was sure, he would know everything there was to know about me.

“Yes, Peter. After two more minutes. Alone, please.”

They gazed at each other. She had always had courage, but that look chilled me down to my cells. Only years later did I know enough to recognize it, when the Feder Group was involved with hostile negotiations: *I offer you this for that, but I despise you for making me do it. Done?* The look stretched to a full minute, ninety seconds. There seemed to be no air left in the room.

Finally he said, “Of course, darling,” and stepped out into the hall.

Done? Done!

What had Daria become since that morning on the rocky Cyprus beach?

She pulled me close. “Nine tonight by Linn's in alley Amsterdam big street. Be careful you not followed.” It was breathed in my ear, so softly that erotic memories swamped me. And with them, anguish.

She was not my Daria. She had stolen *my* Daria, who might have sold her body but never her soul. My Daria was gone, taken over by this manipulating, lying bitch who belonged to Peter Morton Cleary, lived with him, *fucked* him....

I hope I never know anger like that again. It isn't human, that anger.

I hit her. Not on her half-shaven scalp, and not hard. But I slapped her across her beautiful mouth and said, “Face it, Daria. You always were a whore.” And I left.

May the Master of the Universe forgive me.

* * * *

I have never been able to remember the hours between ViaHealth Hospital and the alley off Amsterdam Avenue. What did I do? I must have done something, a man has a physical body and that body must be in one place or another. I must have dodged and doubled back and done all those silly things they do in the holos to lose pursuers. I must have dumped my commlink; those things can be traced. Did I eat? Did I huddle somewhere behind trash cans? I remember nothing.

Memory snaps back in when I stand in the alley behind Linn's, a sleazy VR-parlor franchise. Then every detail is clear. Hazy figures passed me as they headed for the back door, customers maybe, going after fantasies pornographic or exciting or maybe just as sad as mine. A boy in one of the

ridiculous caped-and-mirrored sweaters that were the newest fashion among the young. A woman in a long black coat, hands in her pockets. An old man with the bluest eyes I have ever seen. These are acid-etched in my memory. I could still draw any one of them today. The alley stank of garbage cans and urine—how did Daria even know of such a place?

And what was I expecting? That she would come to me, sick and thin from illness, wobbling toward me in the fading light? Or that Peter Cleary would arrive with goons and guns? That these were my last minutes on Earth, here in a reeking alley under the shadow of the half-finished struts that would eventually support the Manhattan Dome?

I expected all of that. I expected nothing. I was out of my mind, as I have never been before or since. Not like that, not like that.

At nine o'clock a boy brushed past me and went into the VR parlor. He kept his head down, like a teenager ashamed or embarrassed about going into Linn's, and so I only glimpsed his face. He might have been Greek, or Persian, or Turkish, or Arab. He might even have been a Jew. The package dropped into my pocket was so light that I didn't even feel it. Only his hand, light as a breeze.

It was a credit chip, tightly wrapped in a tiny bit of paper that brought to mind that other paper, with Daria's kiss. In ink that faded and disappeared even as I read it, childish block letters said LIFELONG, INC. MUST TO BUY TONIGHT!

The chip held a half million credits.

I hadn't even known that she could read and write.

* * * *

The car that takes me from the Brooklyn Renewal Center is followed, of course. By the feds and maybe by Geoffrey, too, although I don't think he's that smart. But who knows? It's never good to underestimate people. Even a chicken can peck you to death.

The car disappears into the underground streets. Aboveground is for the parks and paths and tiny shops and everything else that lets Dome dwellers pretend they don't live in a desperate, angry, starving, too-hot world. I lean forward, toward the driver.

“Are you an Adams?” This is an important question.

He glances at me in his mirror; the car is not on auto. Good. Auto can be traced. But, then, Stevan knows his business.

The driver grins. “Nicklos Adams, *gajo*. Stevan's adopted grandson.”

All at once I relax. Who knew, until that moment, that my renewed body was so tense? With reason: It had been ten years since I'd seen Stevan and things change, things change. But “*gajo*,” the Romanes term for unclean outsiders, was said lightly, and an adopted grandson holds a position of honor among gypsies. Stevan is not doing this grudgingly. He has sent his adopted grandson. We are still *wortácha*.

Nicklos stays underground as we leave Brooklyn, but he doesn't take the Manhattan artery. Instead he pulls into a badly lit service bay. We move quickly—almost running, I have forgotten how good it feels to run—to a different level and get into a different car. This car goes into Manhattan, where we change again in another service bay. I don't question the jammers; I don't have to. Stevan and I are *wortácha*, partners in an economic enterprise. Once we each taught the other everything we both knew. Well, almost everything.

When the car emerges aboveground, we are in open country, heading toward the Catskills. We drive through the world I have only read about for ten years, since I went into the Silver Star Retirement Home. Farms guarded by e-fences or genemod dogs, irrigated with expensive water. Outside the farms, the ghost towns of the dead, the shanty towns of the barely living. Until the micro-climate changes again—give it a decade, maybe—this part of the country has drought. Elsewhere, sparse fields have become lush jungles, cities unlivable heat sinks or swarming warrens of the hopeless, but not here. A lone child, starveling and unsmiling, waves at the car and I look away. It's not shame—I have not caused this misery. It's not distaste, either. I don't know what it is.

Nicklos says, “The car has stealth shields. Very new. You've never seen anything like it.”

“Yes, I have,” I say. Reuven's ‘bot dog, a flash of nearly invisible light, my arms flailing at the stupid thing. My ring with Daria's hair, her kiss. All at once my elation at escaping Brooklyn vanishes. Such foolishness. I'm still an old man with a bare finger and an ache in his heart, doing something stupid. Most likely my last stupid act.

Nicklos watches me in the mirror. “Take heart, *gajo*. *So ci del o bers, del o caso*.”

I don't speak much Romanes, but I recognize the proverb. Stevan used it often. *What a year may not bring, an hour might*.

From your mouth to God's ears.

* * * *

From the alley behind Linn's I went straight to a public kiosk. That was how little I knew in those days: no cover, no dummy corporation, no off-shore accounts. Also no time. I deposited the five hundred thousand credits in my and Miriam's account, thereby increasing it to a 500,016. Fortunately, the deposit proved untraceable because Daria knew more than me—how? How did she learn so much so fast? And what had such knowledge cost her?

But I didn't think those compassionate thoughts then. I didn't think at all, only felt. The credits were blood money, *owed* me for the loss of the other Daria, my Daria. The Daria who had loved me and could never have married Peter Morton Cleary. I screamed at the screen in the public kiosk, I punched the keys with a savagery that should have gotten me arrested. As soon as the deposit registered, I went to a trading site, read the directions through the red haze in my demented mind, and bought a half million worth of stock in Lifelong, Inc. I didn't even realize that it was among the lowest-rated, cheapest stocks on the exchange. I wouldn't have cared. I was following Daria's instructions from some twisted idea that I was somehow crushing her by doing this, that I was polluting her world by entering it, that I was losing these bogus credits exactly as I had lost her. I was flinging the piece of her dirty world that she'd given me right back in her face. I was not sane.

Then I went and got drunk.

It was the only time in my life that I have ever been truly drunk. I don't know what happened, where I went, what I did. I woke in a doorway, my boots and credit chip with its sixteen credits stolen, someone's spittle on my shirt. If it had been winter, I would have frozen to death. It was not winter. I threw up on the sidewalk and staggered home.

Miriam screaming and crying. My head pounded and my hands shook, but I had thrown up the insanity with the vomit. I looked at this woman I did not love and I had my first clear thought in weeks: *We cannot go on like this.*

"Miriam—"

"Shut up! You shut up! Just tell me where you were, you don't come home, what am I supposed to think? You never come home, even when you're here you're not here, this is a life? You hide things from me—"

"I never—"

“No? What is that plastic bubble with your old uniform? Whose hair, whose kiss? I can't trust you, you're devious, you're cold, you—”

“You went through my Army uniform? My things?”

“I hate you! You're a no-good son-of-a-bitch, even my mother says so, *she* knew, she told me not to marry you, find a real *mensch* she said, this one's not and if you think I ever really loved you, a stinking sex maniac like you but—” She stopped.

Miriam is not stupid. She saw my face. She knew I was going to leave her, that she had just said things that made it possible for me to leave her. She continued on, without drawing new breath or changing tone, but with a sudden twisted triumph that poisoned the rest of our decades together. Poisoned us more, as if “more” were even possible—but more is always possible. I learned as much that night. More is always possible. She said—and everything closed in on me forever—

“—but I'm pregnant.”

* * * *

Technology has been good to the Rom.

They have always been coppersmiths, basket makers, auto-body repairers, fortune tellers, any occupation that uses light tools and can easily be moved from place to place. And thieves, of course, but only stealing from the *gaje*. It is shame to steal from other Romani, or even to work for other Romani, because it puts one person in a lower position than another. No, it is more honorable to form *wortácha*, share-and-share-alike economic partnerships to steal from the *gaje*, who after all have enslaved and tortured and ridiculed and whipped and romanticized and debased the Rom for eight centuries. Technology makes stealing both safer and more effective.

Nicklos drives along mountain roads so steep my heart is under my tongue. He says, “Opaque the windows if you're so squeamish,” and I do. It does not help. When we finally stop, I gasp with relief.

Stevan yanks open the door. “Max!”

“Stevan!” We embrace, while curious children peep at us and Stevan's wife, Rosie, waits to one side. I turn to her and bow, knowing better than to touch her. Rosie is fierce and strong, as a Romani wife should be, and nobody crosses her, not even Stevan. He is the *rom baro*, the big man, in his *kumpania*, but it is Rom women who traditionally support their men and who are responsible for their all-important ritual cleanliness. If a man

becomes *marimé*, unclean, the shame lies even more on his wife than on him. Nobody with any sense offends Rosie. I have sense. I bow.

She nods her head, gracious as a queen. Like Stevan, Rosie is old now—the Rom do no genemods of any kind, which are *marimé*. Rosie has a tooth missing on the left side, her hair is gray, her cheeks sag. But those cheeks glow with color, her black eyes snap, and she moves her considerable weight with the sure quickness of a girl. She wears much gold jewelry, long full skirts, and the traditional headscarf of a married woman. The harder the new century pulls on the Rom, the more they cling to the old ways, except for new ways to steal. This is how they stay a people. Who can say they're wrong?

"Come in, come in," Stevan says.

He leads me toward their house, one of a circle of cabins around a scuffed green. Mountain forest presses close to the houses. The inside of the Adams house looks like every other Rom house I have ever seen: inner walls pulled down to make a large room, which Rosie has lavished with thick Oriental carpets, thick dark red drapes, large overstuffed sofas. It's like entering an upholstered womb.

Children sit everywhere, giggling. From the kitchen comes the good smell of stuffed cabbage, along with the bickering of Rosie's daughters-in-law and unmarried granddaughters. Somewhere in the back of the house will be tiny, unimportant bedrooms, but here is where Rom life goes on, rich and fierce and free.

"Sit there, Max," Stevan says, pointing. The chair kept for *gaje* visitors. No Rom would ever sit in it, just as no Rom will ever eat from dishes I touch. Stevan and I are *wortácha*, but I have never kidded myself that I am not *marimé* to him.

And what is he to me?

Necessary. Now, more than ever.

"Not here, Stevan," I say. "We must talk business."

"As you wish." He leads me back outside. The men of the *kumpania* have gathered, and there are introductions in the circle among the cabins. Wary looks among the young, but I detect no real hostility. The older ones, of course, remember me. Stevan and I worked together for thirty years, right up until I retired and Geoffrey took over the Feder Group. Stevan, who is also old but still a decade younger than me and the smartest man I have ever met, and I made each other rich.

Richer.

Finally he leads me to a separate building, which my practiced eye recognizes for what it is: a super-reinforced, Faraday-cage-enclosed office. Undetectable unless emitting electronic signals, and I would bet the farm I never wanted that those signals were carried by underground cable until they left, heavily encrypted, for wherever Stevan and his sons wanted them to go. Probably through the same unaware satellites I had used to call him.

Here, too, one chair was *marimé*. Stevan points and I sit.

"I need help, Stevan. It will cost me, but will not make money for you. I tell you this honestly. I know you will not let me pay you, so I ask your help from history, as well as from our old *wortácha*. I ask as a friend."

He studies me from those dark eyes, sunken now but once those of the handsomest Rom in his nation. There are reasons that stupid novels romanticized gypsy lovers. Before he can speak, I hold up my hand. "I know I am *gajo*. Please don't insult me by reminding me of the obvious. And let me say this first—you will not like what I ask you to do. You will not approve. It involves a woman, someone I have never told you about, someone notorious. But I appeal to you anyway. As a friend. And from history."

Still Stevan studies me. Twice I've said "from history," not "from our history." Stevan knows what I mean. There has always been affinity between Rom and Jews: both outcasts, both wanderers, both blamed and flogged and hunted for sport by the *gaje*, the Gentiles. Enslaved together in Romania, driven together out of Spain, imprisoned and murdered together in Germany just one hundred fifty years ago. Stevan's great-great-grandfather died in Auschwitz, along with a million other of the Rom. They died with "Z," for *Zigeuner*, the Nazi word for "gypsy," branded on their arms. My great-great-grandfather was there, too, with a blue number on his arm. A hundred fifty years ago is nothing to Romani, to Jews. We neither of us forget.

Stevan does not want to do this for me, whatever it is. But although the Rom do not make family of *gaje*, they are fast and loyal friends. They do not count the cost of efforts, except in honor. Finally he says, "Tell me."

Two days after I bought the LifeLong stock, the news broke. Daria Cleary had had not only a brain tumor but another tumor on her spine, and both were like nothing the doctors had ever seen before.

I am no scientist, and back then I knew even less about genetics than I know now, which is not much. But the information was everywhere, kiosks and the Internet and street orators and the White House. Everybody talked about it. Everybody had an opinion. Daria Cleary was the next step in evolution, was the anti-Christ, was an inhuman monster, was the incarnation of a goddess, was—the only thing everybody agreed on—a lot of money on the hoof.

Both of her tumors produced proteins nobody had ever seen before, from some sort of genetic mutation. The proteins were, as close as I could understand it, capable of making something like a warehouse of spare stem cells. They renewed organs, blood, skin, everything in the adult person. Daria had looked still eighteen to me because her body was still eighteen. It might be eighteen forever. The fountain of youth, phoenix from the ashes, we are become as gods, blah blah blah. Her tumors might be able to be grown in a lab and transplanted into others, and then those others could also stay young forever.

Only, of course, it didn't work out that way.

But nobody knew that, then. LifeLong, the struggling biotech company that Peter Cleary secretly took over to set up commercial control of Daria's tumors, rocketed to the stratosphere. Almost you couldn't glimpse it way up there. My half-million credits became one million, three million, a hundred million. The entire global economy, already staggering from the Change-Over and the climate changes, tripped again like some crazy drunk. Then it got up again and lurched on, but changed for good.

No more changed than my life. Because of her.

Should I say the success of my new stock was ashes in my mouth? I would be lying. Who hates being rich? Should I say it was pure blessing, a gift from the Master of the Universe, something that made me happy? I would be lying.

"I don't understand," Miriam said, holding in her hands the e-key I had just handed her. "You bought a house? Under the Brooklyn Dome? How can we buy a house?"

Not "we," I thought. There was no more "we," and maybe there never had been. But she didn't need to know that. Miriam was my wife, carrying my child, and I was sick of our cruelty to each other. Enough is enough already. Besides, we would be away from her mother.

"I got a stock tip, never mind how. I bought—"

“A stock tip? Oh! When can I see the house?”

She never asked about my business again. Which was a good thing, because the money changed me. No, money doesn't change people, it only makes them more of whatever they were before. Somewhere inside me had always been this rage, this desperation, this contempt. Somewhere inside me I had always been a crook. I just hadn't known it.

I could have lived for the rest of my life on the money Daria gave me. Easy. Miriam and I could have had six children, more, another Jacob with my own personal twelve tribes. Well, maybe not—Miriam still hated sex. Also, I didn't want a dynasty. I never touched my wife again, and she never asked. I took prostitutes sometimes, when I needed to. I took business alliances with men, Italians and Jews and Russians and Turks, most of whom were well known to the feds. And this is when I took on a separate identity for these transactions, the folksy quaint Jew that later Geoffrey would hate, the colorful mumbling Shylock. I took on dubious construction contracts and, later, even more dubious Robin Hoods, those lost cyber-rats who rob from the rich and give to the pleasure-drug dealers.

But dubious to who? The Feder Group did very well. And why shouldn't I loot a world in which Daria—Daria, to whom I'd given my soul—could give me money instead of herself? Money for a soul, the old old bargain. A world rotten at the core. A world like this.

I regret none of it. Miriam was, in her own way, happy. Geoffrey had everything a child could want, except maybe respectability, and when I retired, he took the Feder Group legitimate and got that, too.

I put Daria's lock of hair and paper kiss in a bank deposit box, beyond the reach of Miriam and her new army of obsessive cleaners, human and 'bot. After she died in a car crash when Geoff was thirteen, I had the hair and paper set inside my ring. By then LifeLong had “perfected” the technique for using Daria's tumor cells for tissue renewal. The process, what came to be called D-treatment, couldn't make you younger. Nothing can reverse time.

What D-treatment could do was “freeze” you at whatever age you had the operation done. Peter Cleary, among the first to be treated after FDA approval (the fastest FDA approval in history—mine wasn't the only soul for sale) would stay fifty-four years old forever.

Supermodel Kezia Dostie would stay nineteen. Singer Mbamba would stay thirty. First came Hollywood, then society, then politicians, and then

everybody with enough money, which wasn't too many people because after all you don't want hoi polloi permanently cluttering up the planet. When King James III of England was D-treated, the whole thing had arrived. Respectable as organ transplants, safe as a haircut. Unless the king was hit by a bus, Princess Monica would never succeed to the throne, but she didn't seem to care. And England would forever have its beloved king, who had somehow become a symbol of the "British renewal" brought about by Daria's shaved head.

There were complications, of course. From day one, many people hated the whole idea of D-treatment. It was unnatural, monstrous, contrary to God's will, dangerous, premature, and unpatriotic. I never understood that last, but apparently D-treatment offended the patriotism of several different countries in several different parts of the world. Objectors wrote passionate letters. Objectors organized on the Internet and, later, on the Link. Objectors subpoenaed scientists to testify on their side, and some tried to subpoena God. A few were even sure they'd succeeded. And, inevitably, some objectors didn't wait for anything formal to develop: they just attacked.

* * * *

I stay with Stevan two days. He houses me in a guest cottage, well away from the Rom women, which I find immensely flattering. I am eighty-six years old, and although renewal has made me feel good again, it isn't *that* good. Sap doesn't rise in my veins. I don't need sap; I just need to see Daria again.

"Why, Max?" Stevan asks, as of course he was bound to do. "What do you want from her?"

"Another lock of hair, another kiss on paper."

"And this makes sense to you?" He leans toward me, hands on his knees, two old men sitting on a fallen log in the mountain woods. There is a snake by the log, beyond Stevan. I watch it carefully. It watches me, too. We have mutual distaste, this snake and I. If man was meant to be in naked woods, we wouldn't have invented room service, let alone orbitals. Although in fact this woods is not so naked—the entire *kumpania* and its archaically lush land are encased under an invisible and very expensive mini-Dome and are nourished by underground irrigation. This is largely due to me, as Stevan knows. I don't have to issue any reminders.

I say, "What in this world makes sense? I need another lock of hair and a paper kiss, is all. I have to have them. Is this so hard to understand?"

"It's impossible to understand."

"Then is understanding necessary?"

He doesn't answer, and I see that I need to say more. Stevan has still not noticed the snake. He is ten years younger than me, he still has much of the strength in his arms, he lives surrounded by his wife and family. What does he know from desperation?

"Stevan, it's like this: To be old, in the way I'm old, this is to live in a war zone. Zap zap zap—who falls next? You don't know, but you see them fall, the people all around you, the people you know. The bullets are going to keep coming, you know this, and the next one could just as well take you. Eventually it *will* take you. So you cherish any little thing you still care about, anything that says you're still among the living. Anything that matters to you."

I sound like a damn fool.

But Stevan lumbers to his feet and stretches, not looking at me. "Okay, Max."

"Okay? You can do it? You will?"

"I will."

We are still *wortácha*. We shake hands and my eyes fill, the easy tears of the old. Ridiculous. Stevan pretends not to notice. All at once I know that I will never see him again, that this completes anything I might be owed by the Rom. Whatever happens, they will not set a *pomona sinia*, a death-feast table, for me, the *gajo*. That is all right. You can't have everything. And anyway, the important thing is not to get, but to want.

After so long, I am grateful to want anything.

We walk out of the woods. And I am right, Stevan never notices the snake.

Nicklos drives me back to the Manhattan Dome. "*BaXt, gajo*."

"Good-bye, Nicklos." The young—they believe that luck is what succeeds. I don't need luck, I have planning. Although this time I have planned only to a point, so maybe I will need luck after all. Yes, definitely.

"*BaXt, Nicklos*."

I climb out of the car at the Manhattan Space Port, and a 'bot appears to take my little overnight bag and lead me inside. It seats me in a small room. Almost immediately a woman enters, dressed in the black-and-

green uniform of the Federal Space Authority. She's a *shicksa* beauty, tall and blonde, with violet eyes. Genemod, of course. I'm unmoved. Next to the Rom women, she looks sterile, a made thing. Next to Daria, she looks like a pale cartoon.

"Max Feder?"

"That's me."

"I'm Jennifer Kenyon, FSA. I'd like to talk to you about the trip you just booked up to Sequene."

"I bet you would."

Her face hardens, pastry dough left out too long. "We've notified Agent Alcozer of the CIB, who will be here shortly. Until then, you will wait here, please."

"I've notified my lawyer, who will holo here shortly. Until then, you will bring me a coffee, please. Something to eat would be nice, too." Rom food, although delicious, is very spicy for my old guts.

She scowls and leaves. A 'bot brings very good coffee and excellent doughnuts. Max Feder is a reprobate suddenly awakened from the safely dead, but money is still money.

Twenty minutes later Agent Alcozer shows up, no female sidekick. He, Ms. Kenyon, and I sit down, a cozy trio. Almost I'm looking forward to this. Josh holos in and stands in front of the wall screen, sighing. "Hello, Joe. Ms. Kenyon, I'm Josh Zyla, Max Feder's attorney of record. Is there a problem?"

She says, "Mr. Feder is not cleared for space travel. He has a criminal record."

"That's true," Josh agrees genially. He's even more genial than his father, who represented me for thirty years. "But if you'll check the Space Travel Security Act, Section 42, paragraph 13a, you'll see that the flight restrictions apply only to orbitals registered in countries signatory to the Land-Gonzalez Treaty and—"

"Sequene is registered in Bahrain, a sig—"

"—*and* which received global Expansion Act monies to subsidize some or all construction costs and—"

"Sequene received—"

"—*and* have not filed a full-responsibility liability acceptance form for a given prospective space-faring individual."

Ms. Kenyon is silent. Clearly she, or her system, has not checked to see if Sequene had filed a full-responsibility liability acceptance form to let me come aboard. At least, she hasn't checked in the last hour.

Alcozer frowns. "Why would Sequene file a flight acceptance for Max Feder?"

Why indeed? Full-liability acceptances were designed to allow diplomats from violent countries, who might violently object to exclusion, attend international conferences. The acceptances are risky. If said diplomat blows up the place, no government is legally responsible and no insurance company has to pay. The demolition is then considered just one of those things. Full-liability acceptances are rare, and not designed for the likes of Max Feder.

Josh shrugs. "Sequene didn't tell me how it made its decisions." This is true, since Sequene doesn't know yet that I am coming upstairs. Money isn't the only thing that can be stolen. Every alteration of every record is a kind of theft. Stevan's people are very good thieves. They have had eight centuries to practice.

Jennifer Kenyon, that blonde buttress of bureaucracy, finishes examining her handheld and says, "It's true—the form is on file. I guess you can fly, Mr. Feder."

Alcozer, still frowning, says, "I don't think—"

Josh says, "Are you arresting my client, Agent Alcozer? If not, then this interview is over."

Alcozer leaves, unhappy. Josh shoots me a puzzled look before his holo vanishes. Jennifer Kenyon says stiffly, "I need to ask you some questions, Mr. Feder, preparatory to your retinal and security scans. Please be advised that you are being recorded. What is your full name and citizen ID?"

"Max Michael Feder, 03065932861."

"What is your flight number and destination this afternoon?"

"British Spaceways Flight 165, to Sequene Orbital."

"How long will you be staying?"

"Three days."

"And what is the purpose of your visit?"

Our eyes meet. I know what she sees: a very old man with the hectic and temporary glow of renewal artificially animating his sagging face, too-thin arms, weak legs. A man with how long to live—a year? Two? Maybe five, if he's lucky and his mind doesn't go first. A dinosaur with the

meteor already a foot above the ground, and a criminal dinosaur at that. One who should be getting ready to check out already, preferably without causing too much fuss to everybody staying longer at the party.

I say, "I'm going to Sequene to take D-treatment so I can stay eighty-six years old."

* * * *

Fifteen years after I established the Feder Group, a girl stopped me as I left the office. A strange-looking girl, dressed in a shapeless long robe of some kind with her hair hidden under an orange cap with wings. I didn't remember her name. I had hired her reluctantly—the orange was some kind of reactionary cult and who needs the trouble—but Moshe Silverstein had insisted. Moshe was my—what? If we'd been Italian, he'd have been my "consigliere." We weren't Italian. He was my number-two until, I hoped, Geoffrey became old enough. It was not a robust hope. Geoffrey, now sixteen, was a prig.

The girl said, "Mr. Feder, could I talk to you a minute?"

"Certainly. Talk."

She grimaced. Under the silly hat, the skinned-back hair, she had a pretty face. She was the accountant for show, absolutely honest, in charge only of the books for the Feder Group, which was also honest. You have to present something to the IRS. "She's brilliant," Moshe had argued. I'd argued back that for this small part of our operations we didn't need brilliant, but here the girl was. I hardly ever saw her, since I was hardly ever in the Feder Group office. My real business all took place elsewhere.

"I've found an irregularity," the girl said, and all at once I remembered her name: Gwendolyn Jameson, and the cult with the modest dress and orange hats was the Daughters of Eve. Opposed to any kind of genetic engineering at all.

"What kind of irregularity, Gwendolyn?"

"An inexplicable and big one. Please come look at this screen of—"

"Screens I don't need. What's the problem?" I was already late to meet a man about a deal.

She said, "A quarter million credits have been moved from the Feder Group to an entity called Cypress, Ltd., that's registered in Hong Kong. I can't trace them from there, and even though the authorization has your codes on it, and although I found your hand-written back-up order in the files, something just doesn't seem right."

I froze. I hadn't authorized any transfer, and nobody should have been able to connect Cypress, Ltd. with the Feder Group. Nobody.

"Let me see the hand-written order."

She brought it to me. It looked like my handwriting, but I had not written it. It was *inside* our paper files. And somebody had my personal codes.

"Freeze all accounts *now*. Nothing moves in, nothing moves out. You got that?"

"Yes, sir."

I called Moshe, who called his nephew Timothy, who was my real accountant. We went over everything. I paced around the secret office while Tim ran heavily encrypted software for which I'd paid half my fortune. I chewed my nails, I cursed, I pounded on the wall. Like such foolishness could help? It didn't help. Finally Tim looked up.

"Well?" My throat could barely get the syllable out.

"Two and a half million is missing. They've penetrated three accounts—Cypress, Mu-Nova, and the Aurora Group."

"Zurich?" I said. "Did they get into Zurich?"

"No."

Thank you, Master of the Universe. Also thank the Swiss. Zurich held the bulk of my credits.

"This guy's good," Tim said, and the professional admiration in his voice only made me madder.

"Find him," I said.

"I don't do that kind of—"

"I'll find him," Moshe said. "But it will cost. A lot."

"I don't care. Find him."

Two weeks later he said, "I have him. You won't believe this—it's a goddamn *gypsy*. The name he's using is Stevan Adams."

* * * *

It's not that hard to kidnap a Rom. They rely on hiding, moving, stealth, gypsy-nation loyalty, not so much on pure muscle. What with one thing and another, drought and flooding and war and famine and bio-plagues, the population of the United States is half what it was a hundred years ago. The Romani population has doubled. They take care of their own, but in their own way. Four Rom in a beat-up truck, even an armed and armored truck, were no match for what I sent against them.

Moshe flew me to an abandoned house somewhere in the Pennsylvania mountains. It was old, this house, and peculiar. How did people manage to live here, sixty years ago? Miles from everything, perched on a mountainside, no wind or solar or geothermal energy, facing north with huge expanses of real glass, now shattered. A vacation home, Moshe said. Some vacation—all the place had was a view, which I didn't see because we were using only the basement.

"Where is he?"

"In there."

"Alone, Moshe?"

"Just as you said. The others are in that room over there, the laundry room, drugged. He's just tied up."

"Are you sure you got the right one? Gypsies switch identities, you know. More names for the same person than a Russian novel." I'd done research on the flight in.

Moshe looked insulted. "I have the right one."

I opened the door to what might have once been a wine cellar. Dank, moldy, spiders. Moshe's men had set up a floodlight. Stevan Adams sat bound to a chair, a big man dressed in rough work clothes, with short dark hair and a luxurious mustache. His eyes glittered with intelligence, with contempt. But controlled contempt, this was no cheap cyberthug. This was a man you'd have to kill to break. I didn't kill, not even when it lost me money. There was plenty to take from the world without blood on your hands.

I said, "I'm Max Feder."

He said, "Where are my son and nephews?"

"They're safe. I hurt no one."

"Where are they?"

"In the next room. Drugged but unharmed."

"Show me."

I said to Moshe, "Take the other side of that chair and help me pull it."

Moshe looked startled—this was not how we did things. But it was how I wanted them done now. What so many people never understand is that it's not enough to make money. It's not even enough to be handed money, like Daria (whom I was still, in those years, cursing) handed to me. You have to also be able to keep money, and for that you must be a good judge of people. No—a superb judge of people. This is more than watching

them closely, reading body language, seeing when they blink, blah blah blah. It's a kind of smell, a tingling high in the nose that I never ignore. Never. The mind sees what it wants to see, but the body—the body knows.

This smell is a talent, my only one really. I'm not an accountant, not a software expert (as Geoffrey never tires of telling me), not even a particularly good thief when I'm alone. Always I needed Moshe and the Robin Hoods I used, those shadowy young men so adept at stealing from the rich and so bad, without me, at not dying violently. Me, I don't need violence. I can smell.

Moshe and I grabbed the chair and dragged it out of the fruit cellar and into a crumbling laundry room. We gasped and lurched; Stevan was heavy and we were not exactly athletes. Three young men, one scarcely older than Geoffrey, lay bound on the rotted floor, angelic smiles on their sleeping faces. Whatever Moshe had given them, it looked happy.

"See, Mr. Adams? They breathe, they'll be fine."

"Bring them awake so I can see."

Moshe said, "Who do you think you—"

Again I cut him off. "Bring them awake, Moshe."

He grimaced and called, "Dena!" His daughter, our doctor, came in from outside, carrying her weapon. Her face was masked; I don't risk anybody but Moshe and me. She slapped patches on the boys and they woke up, easily and profanely. Stevan and they conversed in Romanes and even though I didn't speak the language, I could see the moment he told them it was no good trying any kind of physical assault. The youngest spat at me, a theatrical bit of foolishness I forgave at once. They were good boys. And would Geoffrey have done as much for me? I doubted this.

We dragged Stevan back into the other room and locked in the bound boys, Dena on guard. Even if they got themselves loose—which, it eventually turned out, they did—she had knock-out gases and everything else she needed.

I said, "You took two and a half million credits from accounts belonging to me."

Stevan said, "So?"

How do I convey the attitude in that one word? Not just contempt but pleasure, pride, deliberate goad. Even if I killed him, he was not going to back down. *A mensch*.

"So you also took my authorization codes. *And* you slipped into my paper files a forged back-up authorization. How did you do that, Mr. Adams?"

Again just that look.

"I'm not going to harm you, or your relatives. Never. In fact, I want to hire you. My operation can use a man like you."

"I do not work for *gaje*."

"Right. I know. *Usually* you don't work for *gaje*. You people go freelance, this is gutsy, more power to you. But together, you and me together, I can make you rich beyond anything you can imagine."

"I don't need more riches."

Astoundingly, I later found out this was true, and not just because Stevan now had my two and a half million credits. The Rom are not interested in owning very much. Not property: they prefer to rent, so as to move easily and quickly. Vehicles, yes, even planes and helicopters, but always old and beat-up, not conspicuous. Gold for their women but not jewels, and how much gold can one woman wear? Mostly they want to live together in their densely carpeted rooms, getting all they need from gossiping and fighting and loving each other while stealing from everybody else.

Stevan said, "You have nothing I want, *gajo*."

"I think I do. My holdings are big, vaster than anything you've penetrated." So far, anyway. "And I know people. I can offer you something you can't get anyplace else. Safety."

Moshe echoed blankly, "Safety?" I had not told him about this part.

"Yes," I said, addressing Stevan. "I have access to military hardware. Some, anyway. I can get smaller, movable versions of the force-fences that buttress domes. You could keep away anyone you didn't want from your communities, your children, without guns. More: I can do a lot toward keeping any of you that get caught out of jail, unless you commit murder or something."

For the first time, Stevan's expression shifted. Jail is the worst thing that can happen to a Rom. It means separation from the *kumpania*, it means associating with *gaje*, it means it's impossible to avoid *marimé*. Romani will spend any amount of money, go to any lengths to keep one of their own out of prison. Also to keep their children safe; nobody loves

their kids like the Rom. And I already knew that gypsies did not commit murder. On this point, eight centuries of bad press was just plain wrong.

"And of course," I said craftily, "money—a very lot of money—can help with lawyers and such if one of your little operations does happen to go awry."

"I don't work for *gaje*."

"Give it up, Max," Moshe said, with disgust.

But I trusted my nose. I waited.

Stevan gazed at me.

Finally he said, "Have you ever heard of *wortácha*?"

* * * *

Jennifer Kenyon and the FSA let me fly up to Sequene. They have no choice, really. My lawyer is prepared to make a big civil-rights stink if he has to. The current president, who has not had D-treatment, does not want a big civil-rights stink in her administration. She has enough Constitutional problems already. I used to know some of the people causing them.

Shuttle security takes everything but your soul, and that it maybe nibbles at. Every inch of me is stripped and examined by machines and 'bots and people. If I carried any passengers before—lice, tapeworm, non-human molecules—I don't have them after Security is finished with me. I can't bring my own commlink, I can't wear my own clothes, almost I can't use my own bones. Shuttles and orbitals are fragile environments, I'm told. Nobody seems to notice that I'm a pretty fragile environment, too. Finally, dressed in a coverall and flimsy disposable shoes, I'm allowed to stagger onto the shuttle and collapse into a recliner.

Then starts the real punishment.

Space is a game for the young. The flight is hard on my body despite my renewal, despite their gadgets, despite all the patches stuck on my skin like so much red, blue, green, and yellow confetti. I'm eighty-six years old, what do you want from me. Few people wait that long for D-treatment. The attendant doesn't knock me out because then he wouldn't know if anything vital ruptured. It feels like everything ruptures, but in fact I arrive in one unbroken piece. Still, it's a long time before I can walk off the shuttle.

"Mr. Feder, this way, please." A young man, strong. I refuse to lean on his arm. But I look at everything. I've never been on an orbital before, and

please the Master of the Universe, I never will again. Fifty years they've been up here, some of these orbitals, but why should I go upstairs? Money and influence travel by quantum packets, not shuttles. And there's never been anything upstairs that I wanted. Until now.

The shuttle bay is disappointing, just another parking garage. My guide leads me through a door into a long corridor lined with doors. Other people walk here and there, but they're led by cute little gold-colored robots, not by a person. Well, this is no more than I expected.

My guard shows me into a small, bare, white room a lot like the one at the Manhattan Spaceport. These people all need a new interior designer.

A woman enters. "Mr. Feder, I'm Leila Cleary. How was your trip up?"

"Fine." This is Peter Cleary's daughter by one of his wives before Daria. She looks about thirty but of course would be much older. Red hair, blue eyes, at least at the moment, who knows. Eyes as hard as I've ever seen on a woman. She makes Alcozer's sidekick and Jennifer Kenyon both look like cuddly stuffed toys.

"We're so glad you chose to honor Sequene with a trip. And so surprised, especially when we discovered that Sequene had filed a full-responsibility liability acceptance form for you."

"Discovered? When, Ms. Cleary?"

"After you had taken off from Earth and before you landed here. How did that happen, Mr. Feder?"

"I have no idea, Ms. Cleary. I'm an old man, can't keep track of all these modern forms. Unfortunately my memory isn't what it was once." I make my voice quaver. She isn't fooled.

"I see. Well, now that you're here, what can we do for you?"

"I want a D-treatment. I know I don't have an appointment, but I'll stay at the hotel until you can fit me in. And, of course, I'll pay whatever premiums you ask for a rush job. Whatever."

"We don't do 'rush jobs,' Mr. Feder. Our medical procedures are meticulous and individually tailored."

"Of course, of course. Everybody knows that."

"You are not just 'everybody,' Mr. Feder. And Sequene is a private facility. We reserve the right to grant or deny treatment."

"Understood. But why would you want to deny it to me? My record? You've treated others with ... shall we say, complicated backgrounds." I don't name names, although I could. Carmine Lucente. Raul Lopez-Reyes.

Worse of all, Mikhail Balakov. But D-treatment is supposed to be a private thing.

“Mr. Feder, you are eighty-six. Are you sure you know what D-treatment can and cannot do? If you think—”

“I don't,” I say harshly. Master of the Universe, nobody knows better than I what D-treatment can and cannot do. Nobody. “How about this, Ms. Cleary. I'll stay in the hotel, your best suite, and your people can confer, can run whatever tests you like. I'll wait as long as you like. Meanwhile, take all the blood you want, pretend Sequene is Transylvania, ha ha.”

The joke falls flat. Her look could wither a cactus. How much does she know? I have never, in fifty-six years, found out what Daria told Peter Cleary about me. Nor if Peter ever knew that Daria had given me that first half-million credits, so long ago. My guess is no, Leila doesn't know this, but I can't be sure.

“All right, Mr. Feder. We'll do that. You stay in the hotel, and I'll confer with my staff. Meanwhile, the screen in your suite will inform you about the procedure and all necessary consent forms. You can also send them downstairs to lawyers and relatives. Have a pleasant stay in Sequene.”

There is no reason to not have a pleasant stay in Sequene. Once I move—or am moved, my young unsolicited bodyguard at my side—out of the shuttle bay area, the place looks like a five-star hotel in the most tasteful British fashion. Not too new, not too glossy, none of that neo-Asian glitter. Comfort and quality over flash, although Reggie (the b-guard's name) tells me there is a casino “for your gambling pleasure.” Probably the rest of it, too: the call girls, pretty boys, and recreational drugs, all discreet and clean. I don't ask, despite some professional curiosity. I am eighty-six and here just for the D-treatment, a harmless old man trying a last end run around Death. I stay in character.

My suite is beautiful, if small. On an orbital, space costs. Off-white and pale green—green is supposed to be soothing—walls, antique armoire for my clothes, which have arrived on a separate shuttle. State of the art VR, full scent-and tingly-sprays. The bed does everything but take out the trash. One wall chats me up, very courteously giving instructions for “illuminating” the window. I follow them, and gasp.

Space. The suite abuts the orbital shell, and only a clear-to-the-disappearing-point hull separates me from blackness dotted with stars.

Immediately I opaque the window. Who needs to see all that room, all that cold? To me it brings no sense of wonder, only a chill. Three, maybe four atoms per square liter—who wants that? We're meant for warmth and air and the packed molecules of living flesh.

Daria is up here. Somewhere, sequestered, reclusive. She's here. And I'm not going away until I find her.

* * * *

Before Stevan and I became *wortácha*, he insisted that I meet Rosie. He did not have to do this. Romani men do not need their wives' cooperation to conduct their business affairs; they are not Episcopalians. But Rosie and Stevan did things their own way. He relied on her.

And she was really something back then. In her late thirties, curly black hair, snapping dark eyes beside swinging gold earrings, voluptuous breasts in her thin white blouse. A pagan queen. Not since Daria had I seen a woman I admired so much. She hated me on sight.

"*Gajo*," she said, by way of acknowledgment. Her lips barely parted on the word.

"Mrs. Adams, thank you for having me here," I said. It came out too sarcastic. I was barely "here" at all; we stood outside the building that the *kumpania* was renting at the moment, a former dance club miles from the Philadelphia Dome. This neighborhood I never would have entered without Stevan and five of his seven brothers surrounding me. A few blocks away, something exploded. Rosie never flinched. She blocked the door to the building like a battalion defending a bridge.

"Rosie," Stevan said, somewhere between irritation and resignation.

"You make a *wortácha* with my husband?"

"Yes," Stevan said. Irritation had won. "Come in, Max."

Carefully I oozed past Rosie, entered directly into the large main room, and sat where Stevan pointed. No one else was present, but I didn't know then how significant this was. All doors from the dark, thickly curtained room stayed closed. The wall screen had been blanked, although a music cube played softly, something with a lot of bass. In one corner a very large holo of some saint raised his hands to heaven over and over, staring at me with reproachful eyes.

Stevan said, "Some coffee, Rosie."

She flounced off, returning too soon—tension had fallen like bricks the second she disappeared—with three coffees. Two in glasses rimmed with

gold, one in the cheapest kind of disposable cup. I like sweetener in mine but I didn't ask for it. Nobody offered.

Stevan explained to Rosie the tentative plans that he and I had discussed. She wasn't listening. Finally she interrupted him to talk to me.

"You kidnap my husband, my son, my nephews, and now you want us to do business with you? To make a *wortácha*? With a *gajo*? Are you crazy?"

"Getting there fast," I said.

Stevan said, almost pleadingly, "He's a Jew, Rosie."

"Do I care? He's *marimé* and for you—Stevan!—for you to even—" Abruptly she switched into Romanes, which of course I didn't understand, but it no longer mattered because now *I* wasn't listening.

"—died early AM. Family mouth only said—" The soft music had given way to news; it hadn't been a music cube, after all, but one of the staccato newslinks that shot out information like rapid-fire weapons. "—no accident. Repeat, Peter Morton Cleary dead—"

"Max?"

"—and *no accident*! So—failure of D-treatment? All die? To—"

"Max!"

"—see later! Fire in Manhattan Dome—"

Then Rosie was pouring water on my head and I was sputtering and gasping. A lot of water, much more water than necessary.

Stevan said, with a certain disgust, "You fainted. What is it? Are you sick?"

"It was the news," Rosie said. "About that *marimé gaji* with the tumors. Have you had D-treatment, *gajo*?"

"No!"

She studied me. I could have been something staked out in a vivisection lab. "Then did you know this Cleary big man?"

"No." And then I said—was it despair or cunning? who knows these things—"But once, long ago, I met his wife. Briefly. Before she was ... when we were both kids."

Stevan was not interested in this. Rosie was. She gazed at me a long time. I remembered all the old stories about gypsy fortunetellers, seers, dark powers. Nobody had looked at me like that before and nobody has looked at me like that since, for which I am seriously grateful. Some things are not decent.

Stevan said, disgust still coloring his voice, "Max, if you're not well, maybe I—"

"No," Rosie said, and the President of the United States should have such authority in her voice. "It's all right. Set up your *wortácha*. It's all right."

She left the room, not flouncing this time, and I didn't see her again for twenty years. This was fine with both of us. She didn't need a *gajo* in her living room, and I didn't need a seer in my soul. Everybody has limits.

* * * *

Peter Cleary's death set off world-wide panic. He'd had D-treatment and all his tissues were supposed to be constantly regenerating to the age at which he'd had it, which was fifty-four. He shouldn't have died unless a building fell on him. Never was an autopsy more anxiously awaited by the world. The dead Jesus didn't get such attention.

The press swarmed from the hive. Peter Cleary hadn't been the first to get D-treatment because somewhere there had to be anonymous beta-testers. Volunteers, LifeLong had said, and this turned out to be true. None of them stayed anonymous now. Prisoners on Death Row, heartbreaking children dying of diseases with no cure, a few very old and very rich people. Thirty-two people before Peter Cleary had received pieces of Daria's tumors, and all thirty-two of them were now dead.

Each one died exactly twenty years after receiving D-treatment.

Daria Cleary was still alive.

But was she? That's what a corporate spokesman said, but no one had seen her for years. She and Cleary lived in the London Dome. He went to meetings, to parties, to court. She did not. Rumors had flown for years: Daria was a prisoner, Daria had been crippled by her constantly harvested tumors, Daria had died and been replaced by a clone (never mind that no had ever succeeded in cloning humans). Every once in a while a robocam snapped a picture of her—if it was really her—in her garden. She still looked eighteen. But now even these illegal images stopped.

For two weeks I stayed home and watched the newsholos. Moshe handled my business. Stevan, my new partner, didn't contact me; maybe Rosie had something to do with that. More people who had received D-treatment died: a Japanese singer, a Greek scientist working on the new orbitals, a Chinese industrialist, an American actor. King James of England, perpetually thirty-nine, made a statement that said nothing,

elegantly. Doctors spoke, speculating about delayed terminator genes and foreign hosts and massively triggered cell apoptosis and who knows what else. A woman standing in a museum talked about somebody named Dorian Gray.

I waited, knowing what must happen.

The mob appeared to start spontaneously, but nobody intelligent believed that. Cleary stock, not only LifeLong but all of it, had tumbled to nearly nothing. The wild trading that followed plunged three small countries into bankruptcy, more into recession. Court claims blossomed like mushrooms after rain. The attacks on the LifeLong facility and on the Clearys had never stopped, not for twenty years, but not like this. It might have been organized by any number of groups. Certainly the professional terrorists involved were not Dome citizens—at least, not all of them.

The London Dome police would have died to a soldier to stop terrorists, but firing on several thousand of their own citizens, mostly the idealistic young—this they couldn't bring themselves to do. And maybe the cops disapproved of D-treatment, too. A lot of class resentment came in here, and who can tell from the British class system? For whatever reason, the mob got through. The Cleary force fences went down—somebody somewhere knew what they were doing—and the compound went up in flame.

Press robocams zoomed in for close-ups of the mess. Each time they showed a body, my stomach turned to mush. But it was never her.

“Dad,” Geoffrey said beside me. I hadn't even heard him come into my bedroom.

“Not now, Geoff.”

He said nothing for so long that finally I had to look at him. Sixteen, taller than I ever thought of being, a nice-looking boy but with a kind of shrinking around him. Timid, even passive. Where does such a thing come from? Miriam hadn't exactly been a shy wren and me ... well.

“Dad, have you had D-treatment? Are you going to die?”

I could see what it cost him. Even I, the worst father in the world, could see that. So I tore my eyes away from the news and said, “No. I haven't had D-treatment. I give you my word.”

His expression didn't change but I felt the shift inside him. I could smell it, with that tingling high in the nose that I never ignore. I smelled it

with horror but not, I realized, much surprise. Nor even with enough horror.

Geoff was disappointed.

"Don't worry, son," I said wryly, "you'll take over all this soon enough. Just not this week."

"I don't—"

"At least be honest, kid. At least that." And may the Master of the Universe forgive me for my tone. The cat-o'-nine-tails.

Geoff felt it. He hardened—maybe there was more in him than I thought. "All right, I will be honest. Are you what they say you are at school? Are you a crook?"

"Yes. Are you a *mensch*?"

"A what?"

"Never mind. Just drink it down. I'm a crook and you're the son of a crook who eats and lives because of what I do. Now what are you going to do about it?"

He looked at me. Not levelly—he was not one of Stevan's sons, he would never be that—but at least he didn't flinch. His voice wobbled, but it spoke. "What I'm going to do about it is shut down all your businesses. Or make them honest. As soon as they're mine." He walked out of the room.

It was the proudest of him I had ever been. A fool but, in his own deluded way, himself. You have to give credit for that.

I went back to searching the news for Daria.

She appeared briefly the next day. Immediately the world doubted it was her: a holo, a pre-recording, blah blah blah. But I knew. She said only that she was alive and in hiding. That scientists now told her that only she could host the D-treatment tumors without eventually dying. That she deeply regretted the unintentional deaths. That the Cleary estate would compensate all D-treatment victims. A stiff little speech, written by lawyers. Only the tears, unshed but there, were her own.

I stared at her beautiful young face, listened to the catch in her low voice, and I didn't know what I felt. I felt everything. Anger, longing, contempt, misery, revenge, protection. Nobody can stand such feelings too long. I contacted Moshe and then Stevan, and I went back to work.

* * * *

My first evening at Sequene I spend in bed. Nothing hurts, not with a pain patch on my neck, but I'm weaker than I expect. This is not the fault of Sequene. The gravity here, the wall screen cheerily informs me, is 95 percent of Earth's, "just slightly enough lower to put a spring in your step!" The air is healthier than any place on Earth has been for a long time. The water is pure, the food miraculous, the staffs "robotic and human" among the finest in the world. So enjoy your stay! Anything you need can be summoned by simply instructing the wallscreen aloud!

I need Daria, I don't say aloud. "So tell me about Sequene. Its history and layout and so forth." I've already memorized the building blueprints. Now I need current maps.

"Certainly!" the screen says, brightening like a girl drinking in boyish attention. "The name 'Sequene' derives from a fascinating European and American legend. In 1513—nearly six hundred years ago, imagine that!—an explorer from Spain, one Ponce de León, traveled to what is now part of the United States. To Florida."

Views of white sand beaches, nothing like the sodden, overgrown, bio-infested swamp that is Florida now.

"Of course, back then Florida was habitable, and so were various islands in the Caribbean Sea! They were inhabited by a tribe called the Arawak."

Images of Indians, looking noble.

"These people told the Spanish that one of their great chiefs, Sequene, had heard about a Fountain of Youth in a land to the north, called 'Biminy.' Sequene took a group of warriors, sailed for Biminy, and found the Fountain of Youth. Supposedly he and his tribesmen lived there happily forever.

"Of course, no one can actually live forever—"

Daria?

"—but here on Sequene we can guarantee you—yes, guarantee you!—twenty more years *without aging a day older than you are now!* Truly a miraculous 'fountain.' As you undergo this proven scientific procedure—"

Pictures of deliriously happy people, drunk on science.

"—we on Sequene want you to be as comfortable, amused, and satisfied as possible. To this end, Sequene contains luxurious accommodations, five-star dining rooms—"

I said, "Map?"

“Certainly!”

For the next half hour I study maps of Sequene. I can't request too much, I have to look like just one more chump willing to gamble that twenty years of non-aging life is better than whatever I would have gotten otherwise. It's clear the hotel, the hospital, the casino and mini-golf course, and other foolishness don't take up more than one-third of the orbital's usable space. Even allowing for storage and maintenance, there's still a hell of a lot going on up here that's officially unaccounted for. Including, somewhere, Daria.

But it's not going to be easy to find her.

I have dinner in my room, sleep with the help of yet another patch, and wake just as discouraged as last night. I can't communicate with Stevan, not without equipment they didn't let me bring upstairs. I can't do anything that will get me kicked out. All I have is my money—never negligible, granted—and my wits. This morning neither seems enough.

All I really have is an old man's stupid dream.

Eventually I slump into the dining room for breakfast. A waiter—human—rushes over to me. I barely glance at him. Across the room is Agent Joseph Alcozer. And sitting at a table by herself, drinking orange juice or something that's supposed to be orange juice, is Rosie Adams.

* * * *

A year and a half after Peter Cleary died, D-treatments resumed. And there were plenty of takers.

Does this make sense? Freeze yourself at one age for twenty years and then zap! you're dead. All right, so maybe it made sense for the old who didn't want more deterioration, the dying who weren't in too much pain. Although you couldn't be too far gone or you wouldn't have strength enough to stand the surgery that would save you. But younger people took D-treatments, too. Men and women who wanted to stay beautiful and didn't mind paying for that with their lives. Even some very young athletes who, I guess, couldn't imagine life without slamming at a ball. Dancers. Holo stars. Crazy.

LifeLong, Inc. reorganized financially, renamed itself Sequene, and moved out of London to a Greek island. The King of England died of his D-treatment, a famous actress died of hers, the sultan of Bahrain died. It made no difference. People kept coming to Sequene.

Other people kept attacking Sequene. By that time, force fences had replaced or reinforced domes; there should have been no attacks on the island. But this is a mathematical Law of the Universe: As fast as new defenses multiply, counterweapons will multiply faster. Nothing is ever safe enough.

So the Greek island was blown up by devices that burrowed under the sea and into subterranean rock. Again Daria survived. Nine months later Sequene reopened on another island. Customers came.

That was the same year Geoffrey and I finally reconciled. Sort of.

For three years we'd lived in the same house, separate. I admit it—I was a terrible father. What kind of man ignores his sixteen-year-old son? His seventeen-, eighteen-, nineteen-year-old son? But this was mostly Geoff's choice. He wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't answer me, and what could I do? Shoot him? He went to school, had his meals in his room, studied hard. The school sent me his reports, all good. My office, the legitimate Feder Group, paid his bills. For a kid with a large amount of credit behind him, he didn't spend much. When he left high school and started college, I signed the papers. That was all. No discussion. Yes, I tried once or twice, but not very hard. I was busy.

My business had gotten bigger, more complicated, riskier. One thing led me to another, and then another. Stevan Adams and I made a good team. But I took all the risks, since the Rom would rather lose deals than end up in jail. Maybe I took too many risks—at least Moshe said so. He never liked Stevan. "Dirty gypsy keeps *his* hands clean," he said. Not a master of clear language, my Moshe. But the profits increased, and that he didn't complain about.

Federal surveillance increased as well.

Then one October night when the air smelled of apples, a rare night I was home early and watching some stupid holo about Luna City, Geoffrey came into the room. "Max?"

He was calling me "Max" now? I didn't protest—at least he was talking. "Geoff ! Come in, sit down, you want a beer?"

"No. I don't drink. I want to tell you something, because you have a right to know."

"So tell me." My heart suddenly trembled. What has he done? He stood there leaning forward a little on the balls of his feet, like a fighter, which he was not. Thin, not tall, light brown hair falling over his eyes.

Miriam's eyes, I saw with a sudden pain I never expected. Geoff didn't dress in the strange things that kids do. He looked, standing there, like an underage actor trying to play a New England accountant.

"I want to tell you that I'm getting married."

"Married?" He was nineteen, just starting his second year of college! This would be expensive, some little tart to be paid off, how did he even meet her....

"I'm marrying Gwendolyn Jameson. Next week."

I was speechless. Gwendolyn—the accountant Moshe had made me hire, the "brilliant" weird one that had first noticed Stevan's penetration of the Feder Group. Her cult dress and hat were gone, but she was still a mousy, skinny nothing, the kind of person you forget is even in the room. How did—

"I'm not asking your blessing or anything like that," Geoff said. "But if you want to come to the ceremony, you're welcome."

"When ... where..."

"Tuesday evening at seven o'clock at Gwendolyn's mother's house on —"

"I mean, where did you meet her? When?"

He actually *blushed*. "At your office, of course. I went up with the papers for my college tuition. She was there, and I took one look at her and I knew."

He knew. One look. All at once I was back in a *taverna* on Cyprus, twenty again myself, and I take one look at Daria standing by the bar and that's it for me. But *Gwendolyn*? And this had been going on a whole year, over a year. A wedding next week.

Somehow I said, "I wouldn't miss it, Geoff." It was the only decent thing I'd ever done for my son.

"That's great," he said, suddenly looking much younger. "We thought that on the—"

A huge noise from the front of the house. Security alarms, the robo-butler, doors yanked open, shouting. The feds burst in with weapons drawn and warrants on handhelds. Even as I put my hands on top of my head, even as the house system automatically linked to my lawyer, I knew I wasn't going to make Geoff's wedding.

And I didn't. Held without bail: a flight risk. A plea bargain got me six-to-ten, which ended up as five after time off for good behavior. It wasn't

too bad. My lawyers did what lawyers do and I got the new prison, Themis International Cooperative Justice Center, a floating island in the middle of Lake Ontario. American and Canadian prisoners and absolutely no chance of unassisted escape unless you could swim forty-two kilometers.

But islands aren't necessarily impregnable. While I was in prison, Sequene was attacked again. Its Greek island was force-fielded top, bottom, and sides, but you have to have air. The terrorists—the Sons of Godly Righteousness, this time—sent in bio-engineered pathogens on the west wind. Twenty-six people died. Daria wasn't one of them.

Sequene moved upstairs to one of the new orbitals. No wind. Two years later, they were back in business.

My third year in prison, Gwendolyn died. She was one of the victims, the many victims, of the Mesopotamian bio-virus. I couldn't comfort Geoff, and who says I would have even tried, or that he would have accepted comfort? An alien, my son. But there must have been something of me in him, because he didn't marry again for twenty-five years. Gwendolyn, that skinny bizarre prig, had imprinted herself on his Feder heart.

When the government got me, they got Moshe, too. Moshe fought and screamed and hollered, but what good did it do him? He also got six-to-ten. Me, I don't bear a grudge. I do my work and the feds do theirs, the *schmucks*.

They couldn't get close to Stevan. Never even got his name—any of his names. If they had, Stevan would have been gone anyway: different identity, different face. For all I know, different DNA. More likely, Stevan's DNA was never on file in the first place. The Rom give birth at home, don't register birth or death certificates, don't claim their children on whatever fraudulent taxes they might file, don't send them to school. Romani don't go on the dole, don't turn up on any records they can possibly avoid, move often and by night. As much as humanly possible in this century, they don't actually exist. And Rom women are even more invisible than the men.

Which was probably part of the reason that, forty years later, Rosie Adams could be sitting in the dining room of Sequene orbital, pretending she didn't know me, while I totter to a table and wonder what the hell she's doing here.

* * * *

Alcozer ambles over, no sweat or haste, where can I go? Uninvited, he sits at my table. "Good morning, Max."

"Shalom, Agent Alcozer." For the feds I always lay it on especially thick.

"We were surprised to see you here."

The royal "we." Everybody in the fucking federal government thinks they're tsars. I say, "Why is that? An old man, I shouldn't want to live longer?"

"It was our impression that you thought you were barely living at all."

How closely did they observe me in the Silver Star Home? I was there ten years, watching holos, playing cards, practically next door to drooling in a wheelchair. The government can spare money for all that surveillance?

"Have some orange juice," I say, pushing my untouched glass at him. Too bad it isn't cut with cyanide. Alcozer is the last thing I need. Over his shoulder I glance at Rosie, who frowns at the tablecloth, scratching at it with the nails of both hands.

She doesn't look good. At the *kumpania* less than a week ago, she looked old but still vital, despite the gray hair and wrinkles. Then her cheeks were rosy, her lips red with paint, her eyes bright under the colorful headscarf. Now she sits slumped, scratching away—and what is *that* all about?—as pale and pasty as a very large maggot. No headscarf, no jewelry. Her gray hair has been cut and waved into some horrible old-lady shape, and she wears loose pants and tunic in dull brown. From women's fashions I don't know, but these clothes look expensive and boring.

Alcozer leans in very close to me and says, "Max, I'm going to be honest with you."

That'll be the day.

"We know you've been off the streets for ten years, and we know your son has taken the Feder Group legitimate. We have no reason to touch him, so your mind can be easy about that. But somebody's still running at least a few of your old operations, and we don't know who."

Not Moshe. He died a week after his release from prison. Heart attack.

"Also, there are still old investigations on you that we could re-open. I don't want to do that, of course, but I *could*. I know and you know that the leads are pretty cold, and on most the statute of limitations is close to

running out. But there could be ... repercussions. Up here, I mean.” He leans back away from me and looks solemn.

I say politely, “I’m sorry, but I’m not following.”

He says, “Durbin-Nacarro,” and then I don’t need him to chart me a flight path.

The Durbin-Nacarro Act severely limits the elective surgery available to convicted felons. This is supposed to deter criminals and terrorists from changing their looks, fingerprints, retinal patterns, voice scans, and anything else that “hinders identification.” Did they think that someone who, say, blows up a spaceport in San Francisco or Dubai would then go to a registered hospital in any signatory country to request a new face? Ah, lawmakers.

Sequene is, of course, registered in a Durbin-Nacarro country, but nobody has ever applied D-treatment to Durbin-Nacarro. The treatment doesn’t change anything that could be criminally misleading. In fact, the feds like it because it updates all their biological records on everybody who passes through Sequene. Plenty of criminals have had D-treatment: Carmine Lucente, Raul Lopez-Reyes, Surya Hasimo. But if Alcozer really wants to, he can find some federal judge somewhere to issue a dogshit injunction and stop my D-treatment.

Of course, I have no intention of actually getting a D-treatment, but he doesn’t know that. I put on panic.

“Agent ... I’m an old man ... and without this...”

“Just think about it, Max. We’ll talk again.” He puts his hand on mine—such a fucking *putz*—and squeezes it briefly. I look pathetic. Alcozer walks jauntily out.

Rosie is still scratching at the tablecloth. Now she starts to tear her bread into little pieces and fling them around. A young woman in the light blue Sequene uniform rushes over to Rosie’s table and says in a strong British accent, “Is everything all right then, Mrs. Kowalski?”

Rosie looks up dimly and says nothing.

“I’ll just help you to your room, dear.” Gently the attendant guides her out. I catch her eye and look meaningfully upset, and in five minutes the girl is back at my table. “Are you all right then, Mr. Feder?”

Now I’m querulous and demanding, a very rich temperamental geezer. “No, I’m not all right, I’m upset. For what I pay here, that’s not the sight I expect with my breakfast.”

"Of course not. It won't happen again."

"What's her problem?"

The girl hesitates, then decides that my tip will justify a minor invasion of Rosie's privacy.

"Mrs. Kowalski has a bit of mental decay. Naturally she wants to get it sorted out before it can progress any more, so she came to us. Now, would you like anything more to eat?"

"No, I'm done. I'll just maybe take a little walk before my first doctor's appointment."

She beams as if I've just declared that I'll just maybe bring peace to northern China. I nod and start a deliberately slow progress around Sequene. This yields me nothing, which I should have known. I can't get into restricted areas because I couldn't carry even the simplest jammer through shuttle security, and even if I could, it would only call attention to myself, and that I don't need. There are jammers and weapons here somewhere, and from my study of the blueprints I can make a good guess where. I can even guess where Daria might be. But I can't get at them, or her, and it comes to me that the only way I am going to see Daria is to ask for her.

Which I'm afraid to do. When your entire life has narrowed to one insane desire, you live with fear: you breathe it, eat it, lie down with it, feel it slide along your skin like a woman's lost caress.

I was terrified that Daria would say no. And then I would have nothing left to desire. When that happens, you're already dead.

* * * *

In the afternoon the doctors take blood, they take tissue, they put me in machines, they take me out again. Everyone is exquisitely polite. I talk to someone I suspect is a psychiatrist, although I'm told he's not. I sign a lot of papers. Everything is recorded.

Agent Alcozer waits for me outside my suite. "Max. Can I come in?"

"Why not?"

In my sitting room he ostentatiously takes a small green box from his pocket, presses a series of buttons, and sets the thing on the floor. A jammer. We are now encased in a Faraday cage: no electromagnetic wavelengths in and none out. An invisible privacy cloak.

Of course—Alcozer has jammers, has weapons, has anything I might need to get to Daria. Agent Alcozer.

Angel Alcozer.

He says, "Have you thought about my offer?"

"I don't remember an offer. An offer has numbers attached, like flies on fly paper. Flies I don't remember, Joe." I have never used his first name before. He's too good to look startled.

"Here are some flies, Max. You name three important things about the San Cristobel fraud of '89. The hacker's name, the Swiss account number, and the organization you worked with. Then we let you stay up here on Sequene without interference. Sound good?"

"San Cristobel, San Cristobel," I mutter. "Do I remember from San Cristobel?"

"I think you do."

"Maybe I do."

His eyes sharpen. They are no color at all, nondescript. Government-issue eyes. But eager.

"But I need something else, too," I say.

"Something else?"

"I want—"

All at once I stop. High in my nose, something tingles. This time there is even a distinct smell, like old fish. Something is wrong here, something connected to Alcozer, or to the San Cristobel deal—Moshe's deal, not Stevan's—or to this conversation.

"You want what?" Alcozer says.

"I want to think a little more." I never ignore that smell. The nose knows.

He shifts his weight, disappointed. "Not too much more, Max. Your treatment's scheduled for tomorrow."

How does he know that? I don't know that. Alcozer has access to information I do not. Probably he knows where Daria is. All I have to do is give him the San Cristobel flies, and who gets hurt? Moshe is dead, that particular Robin Hood is dead, the island where it all happened no longer even exists, lost to the rising sea. The money was long since moved from the Swiss to the Indonesians and on from there. Nobody gets hurt.

No. There was something else about San Cristobel. Old fish.

I say, "Let me think a few hours. It's a big step, this." I let my voice quaver. "A big change for me, this place. You know I never lived big on Earth. And for a kid from Brooklyn..."

Alcozer smiles. It's supposed to be a comradely smile. He looks like a vampire with a tooth job. "For a kid from Des Moines, too. All right, Max, you think. I'll come back right after dinner." He turns off the jammer, pockets it, stands. "Have another nice walk. By the way, there's no restricted areas on Sequene that you could possibly get into."

"You think maybe I don't know that?"

"I'm trying to find out what you know." Alcozer looks pleased with himself, like he's said something witty. I let him think this. Always good to encourage federal delusion.

Old fish. But whose?

* * * *

I go to dinner. The second I sit at a table, Rosie totters into the dining room, lights up like a rocket launch, and shouts, "Christopher!"

I look around. Two other diners in the room so far, and they're both women. Rosie lurches over, tears streaming down her cheeks, and throws her arms around me. "You came!"

"I—"

A harried-looking woman in the light blue uniform hurries through the doorway. "Oh, Mr. Feder, I'm so sorry, she—"

"It's Christopher!" Rosie cries. "Look, Anna, my brother Christopher! He came all the way from California to visit me!"

Rosie is clutching me like I'm a cliff she's about to go over. I don't have to play blank—I *am* blank. The attendant tries to detach her, but she only clutches harder.

"So sorry, Mr. Feder, she gets a little confused, she—Mrs. Kowalski!"

"Christopher! Christopher! I'm going to have dinner with my brother!"

"Mrs. Kowalski, really, you—"

"Would it help if I have dinner with her?" I say.

The attendant looks confused. But more people are coming into the dining room, very rich people, and it's clear she doesn't want a fuss. Her earcomm says something and she tries to smile at me. "Oh, that would be ... if you don't mind..."

"Not at all. My aunt, in her last days ... I understand."

The young attendant is grateful, along with angry and embarrassed and a half dozen other things I don't care about. I reach out with my one free hand and pull out a chair for Rosie, who sits down, mumbling. A robo-waiter appears and order is restored to the universe.

Rosie mumbles to herself all through dinner, absolutely unintelligible mumbling. The attendant lurks unhappily in a corner. The set of her body says she's has been dealing with Rosie all day and is disgusted with this duty. Stevan must have created a hell of a credit history for Mrs. Kowalski. Rosie says nothing whatsoever to me, but occasionally she beams at me like a demented lighthouse. I say nothing to her, but I get worried. I don't know what's happening. Either she really has lost it—in less than a week? is this possible?—or she's a better actress than half of the holo stars on the Link.

She eats everything, but very slowly. Halfway through dessert, some kind of chocolate pastry, the dining room is full. The first shift, the old people who go to bed at ten o'clock (I know this, I'm one of them) have left and the second shift, the younger and more fashionably dressed, are eating and laughing and ordering expensive wine. I recognize a famous Japanese singer, an American ex-Senator who was once (although he didn't know it) on my payroll, and an Arab playboy. From Sequene's point of view, it is not a good place for a tawdry scene.

Rosie stands and cries, "Daria Cleary!"

My heart stops.

But of course Daria is not there. There's only Rosie, flailing her arms and crying, "I must thank Daria Cleary! For this gift of life! I must thank her!"

People stare. A few look amused, but most do not. They have the affronted look of sleek darlings forced to look at old age, senility, a badly dressed and stooped body that may smell bad—all the things they have come to Sequene to avoid experiencing. The attendant dashes over.

"Mrs. Kowalski!"

"Daria! I must thank her!"

The girl tugs on Rosie, who grabs at the tablecloth. Plates and wineglasses and expensive hydroponic flowers crash to the floor. Diners mutter, scowling. The girl says desperately, "Yes, of course, we'll go see Daria! Right now! Come with me, Mrs. Kowalski."

"Christopher, too!"

I say softly, conspiratorially, to the girl, "We need to get her out of here."

She says, "Yes, yes, of course, Christopher, too," and gives me a tight, grateful, furious smile.

Rosie trails happily after the attendant, holding my hand.

I think, *This cannot work*. Once we're out of the dining room, out of earshot, out of hypocrisy...

In the corridor outside the dining room Rosie halts, shouting again, "Daria!" People here, too, stop and stare. Rosie, suddenly not tottering, leads the way past them, down a side corridor, then another. Faster now, the attendant has to run to catch up. Me, too. So Rosie hits the force fence first, is knocked to the ground, and starts to cry.

"All right, you," the girl says, all pretense of sweetness gone. "That's enough!" She grabs Rosie's arm and tries to yank her upward. Rosie outweighs her by maybe twenty-five kilos. A service 'bot trundles toward us.

Rosie is calling, "Daria! Daria! Please, you don't know what this means to me! I'm an old woman but I was young once, I too lost the only man I ever loved—remember Cyprus? Do you—you do! Cyprus! Daria!"

The 'bot exudes a scoop and effortlessly shovels up Rosie like so much gravel. The girl says viciously, "I've had just about enough of—"

And stops. Her face changes. Something is coming over her earcomm.

Then there is an almost inaudible pop! as the force-fence shuts down. At the far end of the corridor, a door opens, a door that wasn't even there a moment ago. Stealth coating, I think, dazed. Reuven's robo-dog. My hand, unbidden, goes to my naked ring finger.

Standing in the doorway, backed by bodyguards both human and 'bot just as she was in the ViaHealth hospital fifty-five years ago, is Daria.

She still looks eighteen. As I stumble forward, too numb to feel my legs move, I see her in a Greek *taverna*, leaning against the bar; on a rocky beach, crying in early morning light; in a hospital bed, head half shaved. She doesn't see me at all, isn't looking, doesn't recognize me. She looks at Rosie.

Who has changed utterly. Rosie scrambles off the gravel scoop and pushes away the attendant, a push so strong the girl falls against the corridor wall. Rosie grabs my hand and drags me forward. At the doorway, both 'bot and human bodyguards block the way. Rosie submits to a body search that ordinarily would have brought death to any man who touched a Rom woman in those ways, possibly including her husband. Rosie endures it like a pagan queen disdaining unimportant Roman soldiers. Me, I hardly notice it. I can't stop looking at Daria.

Still eighteen, but utterly changed.

The wild black hair has been subdued into a fashionable, tame, ugly style. Her smooth brown skin has no color under its paint. Her eyes, still her own shade of green, bear in their depths a defeat and loneliness I can't imagine.

Yes. I can.

She says nothing, just stands aside to let us pass once the guards have finished. The human one says, "Mrs. Cleary—" but she silences him with a wave of her hand. We stand now in a sort of front hall. Maybe it's white or blue or gold, maybe there are flowers, maybe the flowers stand on an antique table—nothing really registers. All I see is Daria, who does not see me.

She says to Rosie, "What do you know of Cyprus? Were you there?"

She must think Rosie was a whore on Cyprus when Daria herself was—the ages would be about right. But Daria's question is detached, uninvolved, the way you might politely ask the age of an historical building. *Dating from 1649? Really. Well.*

Rosie doesn't answer. Instead she steps behind me. Rosie can't say my name, because of course we are all under surveillance. She must remain Mrs. Kowalski so that she can go home to Stevan. Rosie can say nothing.

So I do. I say, "Daria, it's Max."

Finally she looks at me, and she knows who I am.

* * * *

The Rom have a word for ghosts: *mulé*. *Mulé* haunt the places they used to live for up to a year. They eat scraps, use the toilet, spend the money buried with them in their coffins. They trouble the living in dreams and visions. Wispy, insubstantial, they nonetheless exist. I could never find out if Stevan or Rosie actually believed in *mulé*. There are things the Rom never tell a *gajo*.

Daria has become a *muli*. There is no real interest in her eyes as she regards me. This woman, who once, in a hospital room, risked both our lives to bring me riches and atonement and shame, now has lived beyond all risk, all interest. Decades of being shut away by Peter Cleary, of being hated by people who make periodic and serious efforts to kill her, of being used as a biological supply station from which pieces are clipped to fuel others' vanity, have drained her of all vitality. She desires nothing, feels nothing, cares about nothing. Including me.

“Max,” she says courteously. “Hello.”

The throaty catch, the hesitation, is gone from her voice. For some reason, it is this which breaks me. Go figure. Her accent is still there, even her scent is still there, but not that catch in the voice, and not Daria. This is a shell. In her eyes, nothing.

Rosie takes my hand. It is the first time in forty years, except for when she was crazy Mrs. Kowalski, that Rosie Adams has ever touched me. In her clasp I feel all of the compassion, the life, that is missing from Daria. Nothing could have hurt me more.

I can't look any more at Daria. How do you look at something that isn't there? I turn my head and see Agent Alcozer round the corner of the hallway outside the apartment, running toward us.

And then, at that moment and not a second before, I remember what stank about San Cristobel.

The scam went through fine. But afterward, Moshe came to me. *"They want to do it again, this time with a mole. They've actually got someone inside the feds, in the Central Investigative Bureau. It looks good."*

"Get me the details," I said. And when Moshe did, I rejected the deal.

"But why?" Anguished—Moshe hated to let a profitable thing go.

"Because," I said, and wouldn't say more. He argued, but I stood firm. The new deal involved another organization, the one the mole came from. The Pure of Heart and Planet. Eco-nuts, into a lot of things on both sides of the law, but I knew what Moshe did not and wouldn't have cared about if he had. The Pure of Heart and Planet were connected with the second big attack on LifeLong, on that Greek island. The Pure of Heart and Planet along with their mole in the feds, altered and augmented in sacrifice to the greater glory of biological purity, a guy from what used to be Des Moines.

Alcozer runs faster than humanly possible. He carries something in his hands, a thick rod with knobs that I don't recognize. Weapons change in ten years. Everything changes.

And Daria knows. She looks at Alcozer, and she doesn't move.

The bodyguards don't move, either, and I realize that of course they've reactivated the force fence around the apartment. It makes no difference. Alcozer barrels through it; whatever the military has developed for the Central Investigative Bureau, it trumps whatever Sequene has. It handles the guard 'bot, too, which just shuts down, erased by what must be the jammer of all jammers.

The human bodyguard isn't quite so easy. He fires at Alcozer, and the mole staggers. Blood howls out of him. As he goes down he throws something, so small you might not notice it if you didn't know what was happening. *I* know; this is the first weapon that I actually recognize, although undoubtedly it's been upgraded. Primitive. Contained. Lethal enough to do what it needs to without risking a hull breach, no matter where on an orbital or shuttle you set it off. A MPG, mini personal grenade, and all at once I'm back on Cyprus, in the Army, and training unused for sixty-five years surfaces in my muscles like blossoming spores.

I lurch forward. Not smooth, nothing my drill sergeant would be proud of. But I never hesitate, not for a nanosecond.

I can only save one of them. No time for anything else. Daria stands, beautiful as the moment I saw her in that *taverna*, in her green eyes a welcome for death. *Overdue, so what kept you already?* But those would be my words, not hers. Daria has no words, which are for the living.

I hit Rosie's solid flesh more like a dropped piano than a rescuing knight. We both go down—whump!—and I roll with her under the antique table, which is there after all, a heavy marble slab. My roll takes Rosie, the beloved of my faithful friend Stevan, against the wall, with me on the outside. I never hear the grenade; they *have* been upgraded. Electromagnetic waves, nothing as crude as fragments. Burns sluice across my back like burning oil. The table cracks and half falls.

Then darkness.

* * * *

Romani have a saying: *Rom corel khajnja, Gadzo corel farma*. Gypsies steal the chicken, but it is the *gaje* who steal the whole farm. Yes.

Yes.

* * * *

I wake in a white bed, in a white room, wearing white bandages under a white blanket. It's like doctors think that color hurts. Geoff sits beside my bed. When I stir, he leans forward.

"Dad?"

"I'm here."

"How do you feel?"

The inevitable, stupid question. I was MPG-fragged, a table fell on me, how should I feel? But Geoff realizes this. He says, quietly, "She's dead."

"Rosie?"

He looks blank—as well he might. “Who's Rosie?”

“What did I say? I don't feel ... I can't...”

“Just rest, Dad. Don't try to talk. I just want you to know that Daria Cleary's dead.”

“I know,” I say. She's been dead a long time.

“So is that terrorist. Dead. It turns out he was actually a federal agent—can you believe it? But the woman you saved, Mrs. Kowalski, she's all right.”

“Where is she?”

“She went back downstairs. Changed her mind about D-treatment. Now the newsholos want to interview her and they can't find her.”

And they never will. I think about Stevan and Rosie ... and Daria. It isn't pain I feel, although that might be because the doctors have stuck on my neck a patch the size of Rhode Island. Not pain, but hollowness. Emptiness. Cold winds blow right through me.

When there's nothing left to desire, you're finished.

In the hallway, 'bots roll softly past. Dishes clink. People murmur and someplace a bell chimes. Hollowness. Emptiness.

“Dad,” Geoff says, and his tone changes. “You saved that woman's life. You didn't even know her, she was just some crazy woman you were being kind to, and you saved her life. You're a hero.”

Slowly I turn my head to look at him. Geoff's eyes shine. His thin lips work up and down. “I'm so proud of you.”

So it's a joke. All of it—a bad joke. You'd think the Master of the Universe could do better. I go on an insane quest for a ring eaten by a robotic dog, I assist in the mercy killing of the only woman I ever loved, I save the life of one of the best criminals on the planet—my own partner-in-law in so many grand larcenies that Geoff's head would spin—and the punch line is that my son is proud of me. *Proud*. This makes sense?

But a little of the hollowness fills. A little of the cold wind abates.

Geoff goes on, “I told Bobby and Eric what you did. They're proud of their grampops, too. So is Gloria. They all can't wait for you to come back home.”

“That's nice,” I say. *Grampops*—what a word. But the wind abates a little more.

“Sleep, now, Dad,” Geoff says. He hesitates, then leans over and kisses my forehead.

I feel my son's kiss there long after he leaves.

So I don't tell him that I'm not going back home any time soon. I'm going to have the D-treatment, after all. When I do have to tell him, I'll say that I want to live to see my grandsons grow up. Maybe this is even true. Okay—it is true, but the idea is so new I need time to get used to it.

My other reason for getting D-treatment is stronger, fiercer. It's been there so much longer.

I want a piece of Daria with me. In the old days, I had her in a ring. But that was then, and this is now, and I'll take what I can get. It is, will have to be, enough.

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...AS MUCH AS MOST

by W. Gregory Stewart

Here is as much as
most folks need to know
about space, time and Einstein—if
you go fast enough
from as many A
to as many B as you can
why then
you shall eventually
come to a place
where you see yourself
across a river.

—

(Well, of course he didn't spell it out,
of course you won't find it
in so many words or c-squared
but it's there
between the lines—
WE all know what he meant, wink wink—
we ALL know what he meant.)

—

And here is as much as most folks
will want to know about

Freud and the boys—
whether you can meet your dreams
on the AB itinerary
will determine whether
you look yourself in the eye
when you do, or blink if you do—
or want to wave.

—
...and God's in there, too, some place, I think.

—W. Gregory Stewart

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ON BOOKS

by Paul Di Filippo

My Dirty Little Literary Find

Where is Liz Jensen on your SF radar screen?

If you're anything like I was just a short time ago, you'll have to honestly answer “nowhere.”

Jensen is not marketed as a genre author, nor reviewed in genre venues. And she doesn't exactly rate big coverage from mainstream, establishment publications either—a result, I believe, of her slipstream nature, and her consequent falling in between two camps. And she's British, which, sadly, often militates against a wide audience in the USA. (I suspect, based on the praise-filled British blurbs for her books, that she's got a much higher profile in her native land.) These factors make it unlikely that *Asimov* readers will have a deep familiarity with her work. And that's a darn shame, given her superb prose, witty fantastical conceits, narrative drive, and mature sophistication.

Her name first jumped out at me when perusing a monthly circular from the Science Fiction Book Club, which, to their vast credit, is offering her latest novel, *My Dirty Little Book of Stolen Time* (Bloomsbury, hardcover, \$23.95, 305 pages, ISBN 1596911883). We'll get to this book in good time. But let's have a look first at her five prior books.

Jensen's maiden voyage was *Egg Dancing* (1995), and it possessed all the satirical verve and zing of a Kit Reed or George Saunders production. Bedraggled, hapless Moira Sugden is married to your typical mad

gynecologist, Gregory, who is, unbeknownst to Moira, using her as an incubator to test his new treatment that will theoretically create a “perfect baby.” When Moira proves genetically unsuitable, he turns to his lush co-worker Ruby Gonzalez and scientifically knocks her up. Moira, understandably, finds this a bit much. When you factor in having to deal with a sister, Linda, who's besotted with a TV evangelist, and a madhouse-incarcerated Mum who's busy pottering about in an imaginary greenhouse (a mental construct that turns out to have real-world repercussions), then you can just imagine how Moira's world threatens to collapse tragically around her ears—until she learns how to take names and kick some ass.

Jensen experiments bravely throughout with shifting points of view, and regales us with plenty of memorable quips and aperçus amidst the shambles of Moira's life. Moira thinks about her rival Ruby: “She was very flirtatious for a fat woman. Or perhaps just very fat for a flirtatious one.” All in all, a bravura debut.

Would Jensen simply repeat herself for her next outing? Far from it. Although her second book, *Ark Baby* (1998), arguably also centers around fertility and marriage, it is cast not as a contemporary melodrama but rather as a mixed steampunk/near future satire. One track concerns rogue veterinarian Bobby Sullivan. Sullivan lives in the then-future era of 2005, at a time when all of the UK is suffering from an inexplicable sterility plague. (His humiliating specialty is ministering to pets that act as child surrogates.) Forced to relocate, for various reasons, to a rural peninsula called Thunder Spit, he finds his life intersecting with two strange women, the twins Blanche and Rose Ball. The heroic sexual efforts of this trio will eventually shatter the sterility plague.

But the contemporary track takes a back seat to the wacky and resplendent Victorian half of the book. Here, we witness the strange birth and career of one Tobias Phelps, offspring of the Gentleman Monkey and a contortionist female. Phelps will eventually find the love of his life in the form of the immense Violet Scrapie, despite Violet's having had the misfortune once to cook up the carcass of Tobias's father. And of course Jensen sews up the two halves of her canvas expertly, melding past with present.

Jensen exfoliates her parallel plots with a wealth of hilarious details and incidents, much like John Barth or Neal Stephenson. Dealing with the

hot-button Darwinian issues of human descent, she manages to extend the mantle of humanity across several species, illuminating the maxim that human is as human does, and that genes do not necessarily make the man. And once again, Jensen's formalistic and linguistic experiments contribute to the enjoyment rather than get in the way.

With her third book, Jensen confirms her delightful and irrepressible hummingbird habits, as she flits to yet another mode. With *The Paper Eater* (2000), Jensen creates one of the best dystopias of recent memory, easily comparable to the work of Max Barry and Rupert Thomson. The man of strange habits from the title is a certain Harvey Kidd. The realtime frametale finds Harvey on a floating prison ship, where chewing on scrap paper to produce papier-mâché has become his sanity-preserving habit. (His skin is grey from ingested inks.) As Harvey interacts with his cellmate, we eventually learn his life story.

A psychologically troubled youth without a family, living on the artificial island “utopia” of Atlantica, Harvey created a virtual set of relatives for himself. He eventually went on to utilize these avatars in a giant series of fraudulent financial transactions. Betrayed by his real-life daughter, Harvey is imprisoned. He finds true love in the arms of Hannah Park, a government employee who exhibits her own psychological crippling. Meanwhile, the Orwellian government of Atlantica, which has been taking in the world's hazardous waste for profit, finds that Harvey's imaginary family provides the perfect hook for a terrorist explanation of why Atlantica is ready to sink in garbage. (I suspect that this whole riff is a clever homage to the 1998 episode of *The Simpsons* entitled “Trash of the Titans.”) But despite the government's best (worst) efforts, the forces of reform win out, leaving Hannah and Harvey to live happily ever after—in their mutually supportive damaged way.

With echoes of Matt Ruff, Philip K. Dick, J.G. Ballard, and William Gaddis, Jensen's third book is a small neglected masterpiece.

Jensen surprises yet again with her fourth book—because at first she seemingly reverts to the near-mainstream domesticity of *Egg Dancing*. But as we soon learn, she's really taking us to a different territory altogether.

War Crimes for the Home (2002) is the life story of Gloria Winstanley, an elderly Cockney lady with a life full of “secrets and lies,” to use the relevant title of Mike Leigh's 1996 film. Like Moira's mother in *Egg*

Dancing, Gloria is an old lady confined to a not unpleasant but nonetheless stifling nursing home. Her son Hank and daughter-in-law Karen make frequent visits but are unable to disturb Gloria's façade, alternately dreamy and abstracted or irritable and spiteful. Gloria claims she has Alzheimer's, but the reality is vastly more complicated. Gloria's memory, we eventually learn, was tampered with hypnotically during World War II. In parallel tracks (as with *Ark Baby*), we witness the seminal events of the war that damaged Gloria's psyche, as we also witness the events in the present that just may heal her, albeit with a certain measure of pain.

Gloria's characterization of her plight as being caught up in a "time muddle" is a clue as to how this surreal, at times stream-of-consciousness book should be read. It's really the female, homefront equivalent of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), whose protagonist was also unstuck in time. This becomes explicit at the end, when Gloria sums up her experiences thus: "I didn't have no war like Izzi's war, or any man's war, I thought. The war I had, it was my little war, a woman's war, a nobody's war. There were millions of us living that war, thousands of girls like me...." Jensen is out to portray the damages that warfare produces even many miles from the front line. And she does so with her typical humor and ingenious plotting and symbolical constructions. Gloria's story becomes both macroscopically emblematic and microscopically unique.

By now I think you will note that Jensen's protagonists are all a damaged lot, even bastards sometimes. Yet they are utterly empathy-inducing. It's a hard trick to bring off, and the fact that Jensen succeeds over and over again is testament to her talents. The reign of warped souls continues in her fifth book.

Her fourth book, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* (2004), ventures firmly into Patrick McGrath or early Ian McEwan territory: New Gothic. The child character, a nine-year-old French boy, who tells his story in a truly eerie, psychotic yet wise-beyond-his-years voice, has survived a cascade of near-fatal childhood accidents. Like a cat with nine lives, he's used up eight, he feels, and is now embarked on his ninth. And what a life it turns out to be. An accident during a family picnic sends Louis into a coma. He is placed at a long-term-care institution run by one Dr. Pascal Dannachet. Attendant upon her son is devoted mother Natalie Drax. Seemingly no more than a bereaved parent, Natalie hides dark secrets about her and Louis. We learn through a series of convoluted revelations that she is

really the monster behind the scenes of her unfortunate son's malaise. But before the ultimate disclosure of her own madness and perfidy, she will ensnare Dr. Dannachet as yet another victim. His half of the narration chronicles an *amour fou* or *folie à deux*, and how he fights his way courageously back to sanity.

Did I mention that from his coma Louis is able to witness events and influence people telepathically? Oh, sorry, that's just Jensen's delicious black icing on the cake of madness. This book is the closest you can come in print to a film by Pedro Almodovar.

Surely you will have noted by now that Jensen is a tragicomic writer, mixing humor and pessimism in equal parts, or perhaps even favoring humor a tad. But *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* is unremittingly bleak. As if to counterbalance this, Jensen turns in her latest novel, the aforementioned *My Dirty Little Book of Stolen Time*, to more or less pure farce (embellished delightfully with several B&W illos by Peter Bailey). What she delivers here is, improbably, a timeslip romance. But not the debased and simple-minded bodice-ripping kind. Rather, it's a mix of Tom Holt and Kage Baker, Harry Harrison and H. G. Wells, James Blaylock and Lemony Snicket.

The year 1897 in Copenhagen finds our young heroine-narrator, Charlotte Schleswig, struggling to make a living as a whore. Burdened by the care of a gluttonous and slatternly mother (except Charlotte insists that Fru Schleswig, the slovenly pig, cannot possibly be related to a beautiful princess such as Charlotte), our working girl is always on the alert for a more lucrative scam. She believes she's landed on easy street when she and her mother get a housecleaning job with Fru Krak, a rich and egotistical widow. While the elder Schleswig labors away sweeping up dust bunnies, Charlotte pilfers whatever's not nailed down to pawn.

Fru Krak's husband, it turns out, mysteriously vanished seven years ago. His disappearance is connected with a locked room in the basement of the Krak manor. Charlotte's curiosity is aroused, and she breaks in one night with her mother. They discover a curious contraption, and before you can say "Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits*," they are accidentally transported to our era's London. There they find Professor Krak hale and hearty, living among a surreptitious refugee community of fellow time-traveling Danes. (If this notion does not inspire immediate laughter, stop reading immediately.)

Charlotte is transfixed by the modern age, especially when she falls in love with a dashing young Scottish archaeologist named Fergus McCrombie. Soon she induces Professor Krak to sponsor a Christmas visit back to 1897, to introduce Fergus to her native era. (The visit coincides with the Professor's own schemes anyhow.) But once back in "history," everything goes wrong. Charlotte is separated from both Fergus and the Professor, and only her own ingenuity can restore the lovers.

Jensen has immense fun with this setup. Her depiction of period Copenhagen is rich and sensorily deep. (Nor is this choice of nationality for Charlotte merely arbitrary. Jensen invokes, both overtly and covertly, the spirit of Hans Christian Anderson and his famous fairytales as a template for Charlotte's life story.) Of course we also get the expected but still humorously contrived reactions of a visitor from the past to modern life, as well as some neat chrono-paradox mindblowers. The characters are all humanly endearing, with every high-minded, principled stand undercut by carnality or vice-ridden selfishness. And yet the whole narrative is full of warm good-heartedness. All of these virtues are couched in Jensen's vibrant prose that goes down easy, but which is also full of nuggets of observation and wit. "The Pastor ... was a paunchy man in his middle to late years, with clattering false teeth that seemed to roam his mouth like a tribe of nomads in search of land on which to pitch camp."

Discovering the work of Liz Jensen is like stumbling on a time-machine in a basement: you have no idea of where it will take you, but you know it'll be a hell of a ride.

* * * *

Everything Old Is New Again

In 2004 I had the privilege of attending the Utopiales Festival in Nantes, France, the birthplace of Jules Verne. Wandering the historic streets of that city in the company of such folks as Bruce Sterling and Walter Jon Williams, I began to commune with our famous literary ancestor. And when we were taken by the Festival organizers to the library that holds Verne's papers and allowed to gaze in wonder at his original manuscripts, the bond became even deeper.

You too can achieve something of the same sensations through the medium of a new book: Gonzague Saint Bris's *The World of Jules Verne* (Helen Marx Books, hardcover, \$28.00, 86 pages, ISBN 1-885586-42-1). Issued in 2005 in France to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary

of Verne's death, and now translated by Helen Marx for an English-speaking audience, this book is an impressionistic, hop-scotching journey through Verne's life. Mingling journalism, scholarship, criticism, and fannish encomiums, Saint Bris seeks to convey Verne's character and historic stature and the pleasures that his "extraordinary voyages" deliver. In this effort, he's aided immeasurably by beautiful illustrations (in what I take to be watercolor) by Stéphane Heuet.

The bite-sized chapters are arrayed along a mostly straight line of Verne's life, from his early boyhood days in Nantes to the heights of his worldwide fame and posthumous career. Saint Bris has a talent for conjuring up the immediacy of a bygone era: clipper ships, the dawn of electricity, and so on. His grasp of the virtues and vices of Verne's fiction is admirable. And he drops neat little anecdotes and tidbits from the present into the mix. Heuet's drawings are charming in the extreme. Not really aligned with Hergé's "clear line" style, they nonetheless embody some of the same bold forthrightness and verve of a Tintin adventure.

Taken all in all, this affectionate and satisfying tribute volume will surely encourage readers to delve more deeply into Verne's biography.

Verne was famously disserved for decades by bad translations. Around 1965, a revolution in Verne scholarship opened the floodgates on better, more mature and complete versions of the famous novels, and the freshet of reenvisioned titles continues unabated today.

You can learn all about this movement to restore Verne's full grandeur by reading the ancillary material connected with *The Meteor Hunt* (Bison Books, trade paperback, \$15.95, 227 pages, ISBN 0-8032-9634-7). The scholarly apparatus and translation of this novel is provided by Frederick Paul Walter and Walter James Miller, who estimate that all of Verne's oeuvre will finally be available in good clean versions no later than the end of the first quarter of our new century. With this novel, they have made an admirable contribution to that effort.

The Meteor Hunt was a very late work of Verne's. In fact, it remained in manuscript at his death in 1905, and was only published in a hacked-up, remixed version by his son Michel in 1908. (Michel Verne's many sins against his father's work are catalogued precisely by the editors in an appendix.) Hailing from the end of Verne's life, this book breaks no new speculative ground for its period. But in place of revolutionary insights and predictions, we get assured comedy, drama, satire, and scientific rigor.

Not a bad package at all. In fact, the whole effect of this fizzy, lively novel (whose engagingly colloquial translation is the direct result of wise choices by Walter and Miller) is rather as if the classic film *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* (1963) had been predicated around a scientific premise rather than simple buried treasure.

We are in Virginia, in the mythical town of Whaston, watching the doings at two households, both of which are headed by amateur astronomers. Mr. Dean Forsyth and Mr. Stanley Huddleston are friendly rivals whose respective children—Francis Gordon, a nephew of Forsyth's, and Jenny Huddleston, daughter of Stanley—are engaged to be married. (The tale of another pair of more mature lovers, Seth Stanford and Arcadia Walker, is tellingly intermingled in the narrative as well.) But then the two sky-watchers both discover a new meteor at precisely the same time. Each man lays claim to the rock, and their subsequent bull-headed contention seems to doom the romance.

But when the meteor is revealed by spectral analysis to be composed of pure gold, the whole world goes as crazy as the citizens of Whaston.

Verne has lots of fun showing the very contemporary-sounding media, legal, and political circus that results from the astronomical find. He pokes fun at his own famous writings ("the pipedreams of some wool-gathering French novelist"), and in general exhibits great glee in the folly of mankind, before letting love triumph in the end. (The editors tease out the autobiographical components of this tale very well.) He cleverly avoids his first sleek infodump until nearly fifty pages into the story, by which time we are already hooked by the premise and the characters. In short, the craft of a lifetime of writing is brought to play on the simple conceit, and it's milked masterfully for all it's worth.

Our editors in an endnote at one point compare Verne to Henry James in his concerns, and it's not a stretch. The old savant from Nantes, forever in some respects a wide-eyed naïve boy marveling at the wonders of the globe, had also become, through hard-earned experience, a cosmopolitan citizen of the world.

* * * *

Wide Spectrum Fantasy

Consider for a moment the different characters of two well-known outlets for fantastical literature, as being representative of two schools of fantasy. I refer to the magazines known respectively as *Realms of Fantasy*

and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. The former, helmed by Shawna McCarthy, who once sat behind the desk now occupied by our own Sheila Williams, seems to represent the more traditional end of the fantasy spectrum, presenting stories of a certain “commercial” and perhaps conservative stripe. The other zine, run by Gavin Grant and Kelly Link, radiates a determinedly “postmodern,” slipstreamy vibe. Two poles of the fantasy spectrum, right?

It seems hard to imagine an author whose work might comfortably appear in both places. And by that, I don't mean different stories from the same person, since many authors work alternately in varying modes, and could easily slant a particular piece toward one zine or the other. But rather, I'm referring to a hypothetical author who could write a single polymorphous, multivalent story and then plausibly sell that same story to either *RoF* or *LCRW*, where it would appear right at home in either venue.

But I believe I've found such an author in the person of Vera Nazarian. Her work treads a delicate tight-rope between the poles exemplified (perhaps ultimately problematically) by *RoF* and *LCRW*. The stories she chooses to tell have all the good old-fashioned narrative and thematic virtues of “commercial” fantasy while also sustaining enough allegorical, subtextual, and formalistic oddities to place them in the “postmodern” camp. A winning and striking combination.

Nazarian's newest collection of sixteen stories—none of which, curiously enough, have actually appeared in either *RoF* or *LCRW*—is titled *Salt of the Air* (Prime Press, hardcover, \$29.95, 266 pages, ISBN 0-8095-5738-X). It comes with an insightful introduction by Gene Wolfe, which should be tip-off enough that we are dealing with high-quality goods here. Let's take a walk through the stories, to see Nazarian's range and concerns.

“*Rossia Moya*” is somewhat atypical for this volume, starting out as an SF piece. In the near future, the world has decided to cordon off a failed Russian state. Our protagonist is a woman, Russian-born (like Nazarian herself, a bit of autobiography that lends heft to this piece), who returns for one last visit to her homeland and finds herself taking an unpremeditated action of startling permanence. The story then opens out into a fantastical conclusion, much like Disch's famous “The Asian Shore.” We should note the gender of the protagonist, since every tale herein is also seen through a woman's eyes.

The standard fable of hideous male lover and at-first-unwilling female consort is inverted for “Beauty and His Beast,” wherein a young man trespasses on the garden of a bestial queen. Unfortunately, there is no happily-ever-after for this pair, an outcome sad yet somehow uplifting, a type of conclusion that Nazarian will employ again before this book is over.

Reading like Cory Doctorow's *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* (2005), “The Young Woman in a House of Old” might be my favorite tale here. Miss Marianne Mornay (what a perfect name!) is a human raised in a house of goblins, and finds her life in the outside world drastically hampered by her upbringing. Mournful yet ultimately accepting of the limits of destiny, she and her story might be a Charles Addams cartoon fleshed out.

“Absolute Receptiveness, the Princess, and the Pea” manages to conflate Oedipal longings with the famous fairytale, ending with a kind of O. Henry zinger. And for a change-up, Nazarian next channels Moorcock in an Elric-style tale of brother and sister mages, called “Bonds of Light.”

Tanith Lee seems a touchstone for me in placing Nazarian in a writerly lineage, and “The Starry King” harks to Lee's sensibilities as it tells of a woman who manages to free a mythic figure bound in the celestial realm. Note the theme here also of attaining release from ethical burdens by sacrifice, for we'll encounter it again.

Poor Janéh is a girl born without the ability to show expressions, in “The Stone Face, the Giant, and the Paradox,” although she seethes inside with the normal range of emotions. How she attains normality is the thrust here.

Nazarian's fictions, aside from the opener, move through a pre-technological realm best known as fable-land, where royalty rules and magic obtains, but hoary clichés such as fated swords and rings, dragons and elves play no part. It's an older realm than the rehashed Tolkien-land rip-offs, and the universal, timeless setting is part of the potency of her craft. “A Thing of Love” features one such cruel land where a female court executioner named Faelittal must face carrying out a certain death sentence that threatens to undo all her past equilibrium.

In a tale straight out of Robert E. Howard, Nazarian bring us a warrior named Iliss, who, having witnessed the death of her family at the hands of invaders from the far north, decides to kill their war-like god or die trying.

“The Slaying of Winter” also features that extinction of heart-pangs by certain sacrifices that we saw in “The Starry King.”

Whiffs of Lord Dunsany emanate from “Sun, in Its Copper Season,” which tells of a woman whose sleep patterns literally govern the coming of night. Although Nazarian's tone has, prior to the next story, “Lady of the Castle,” allowed small and brief glimpses of humor, she is generally a somber author. But “Lady...” which finds a poor roving singer named Ruricca NoOnesDaughter placed by odd circumstances onto a throne, to the resulting consternation of the nobility, including the lad who thought to inherit his father's place, is rather slapstick.

“Wound on the Moon” is the first of two stories with a kind of *Arabian Nights* feel. This one tells of a thief who dares to go up against a merciless potentate. The other tale in this mode is “The Story of Love,” in which a girl abused by her father grows up surprisingly wise and healthy, save for one blind spot, which only a trip to a temple dedicated to the goddess of love can remedy.

The final three stories again exhibit Nazarian's spacious range. “I Want to Paint the Sky” turns on a punning interpretation of the title, and is admittedly slight, yet ultimately joyous nonetheless. “Lore of Rainbow” conflates a woman's mythic love affair and its collapse with the literal loss of color from the world. And “Swans” skillfully deploys the old trope of a magical garment that renders humans into animal form.

Nazarian's prose across all these fine tales is uniformly expertly fashioned, never straining for effect or missing the chance to register a moment of insight. She's a dab hand at catchy opening lines, such as: “The ageless young woman reposes upon a settee of gossamer silk, propped up by pillows and fanned by servants.” Or, “As the late afternoon sky stood lavender upon gold in the great city, the thief was imprisoned for the highest crime there was.” Her secondary characters are formed nearly as deeply as the various female protagonists, who seem to share a sisterly bond. Her fantastical conceits are either strikingly new or witty revamps of older ones. And she always manages to hew to time-tested narrative strategies while simultaneously layering in metafictional goodness.

With talent like this, it's no wonder she should be welcome everywhere.

* * * *

Nantier, Beall, Minoustchine

Perhaps you never knew that the publisher NBM, whose wares I've often praised, derives its acronym from the three names above, but such is the case. I don't know who Beall and Minoustchine are, but last year, at New York's Comic-Con, I had the pleasure of finally meeting publisher Terry Nantier, who has been sending me review copies for so long, and I got to tell him in person what a great job he's been doing. The latest offerings from NBM uphold my kudos.

There's a very short story—really just a few scattered paragraphs—that ostensibly connects the images in Luis Royo's *Dark Labyrinth* (hardcover, \$24.95, 64 pages, ISBN 1-56163-484-0). This fixup text, telling of a crazed supernatural artist and his apprentice, much like the linkages in Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* (1951), is actually superfluous. Our main pleasure comes simply from feasting our gaze on Royo's exotic women, clad in armor, leather, mail, masks, bustiers, or nothing much at all. (Oh, yes, there're a few male figures here as well, but all pretense at equality aside, this is really a Calderesque gynocracy.) Royo has created a gallery of gothically glamorous Suicide Girls whose like will never be found in real life, and captured them at leisure and in battle and under delicate torture. But isn't uncaptureability the essence of fantasy? Your mileage, of course, will vary.

Artist Richard Moore has been known to produce the occasional erotic escapade himself, such as in his books *Horny Tails* (2001) and *Short Strokes 2* (2006). But in his comedic horror series *Boneyard*, the delightful cheesecake is kept to PG levels, and does not occupy center stage. For instance, the latest compilation, *Volume Five* (trade paperback, \$9.95, 112 pages, ISBN 1-56163-479-4) does indeed feature nude gals in a shower scene at a summer camp—but they're acting out a cliché to trap a serial killer. Humor trumps sexy every time in this series. To refresh your memory about the premise: human Michael Paris has inherited a cemetery filled with supernatural critters, not least of which is his kinda girlfriend, the vampire named Abbey. In this outing, Michael and pals work to bring the mysterious summer-camp killer to justice, while also suffering an assault from Jack Pumpkinhead on their home. Moore's B&W art is up to its usual superb standards, and his dialogue remains snappy and clever. And if you've ever wanted to see what happens when a baseball bat connects with a giant sentient pumpkin, you'll get your wish here.

Last but most assuredly not least is the latest installment in the *Dungeon* saga of Joann Sfar and Lewis Trondheim: *Twilight Vol. 2: Armageddon* (trade paper, \$14.95, 96 pages, ISBN 1-56163-477-8). If you recall my review of the last installment, you'll be aware that Marvin the Dragon and his protégé Marvin the Red (Red Rabbit, that is), were on the run from their ex-buddy who had taken over the Dungeon, that playground for barbarians. Well, where they end up is totally unexpected, at least by me. And how they get there is even more surprising.

In one otherwise innocuous panel on page eleven, the authors blithely announce, "And at that precise moment, the planet Terra Amata explodes." Yes, the very globe on which all the action so far has occurred just goes kerblooey without warning or cause. It's this kind of spontaneous, daring, oneiric, fertile, quirky inventiveness that makes this series such a winner.

The planet separates into habitable chunks, floating crags aloft above the molten core of Terra Amata. The progress of the Marvins (and their pal, a drug-addict bird named Gilberto, straight out of *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*) now consists of leaping from crag to crag. They eventually end up in a lush Polynesian setting, where they encounter several new characters, most notably Marvin Dragon's irascible giant son and his sexy lizard bride Ormelle. Marvin the Red falls for Ormelle (and likewise), while Marvin Dragon tries to learn to be a good dad (and grandfather!). There are quests, battles, romps in bed, disappearances, reunions, invisible monsters, trials and "granny's good cake," enough for any ten lesser books. The art continues to charm with its loose, rubbery, wrinkled lines. May Sfar and Trondheim go on for many more volumes!

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MY WINDOW ON THE WORLDS

by G.O. Clark

I can't believe
I'm watching dust devils
on Mars, moving across the
Gustav Crater past the watchful
eye of Spirit,

—

the little rover that

could, along with its twin,
still outlasting all expectations,
not to mention the pink,
one-man bunny band.

—

That old phrase,
my window on the world,
should be pluralized now,
our robot probes and rovers
beaming back images

—

only imagined in the
past, broadcasting them
to my techno-windows on
the worlds, just a remote,
or mouse click away.

—G.O. Clark

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

BY Erwin S. Strauss

* * * *

There's bound to be a Memorial Day convention in your neck of the woods. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—
Erwin S. Strauss

MAY 2007

18—20—**KeyCon**. For info, write: **Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E7**. Or phone: **(204) 669-6053** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web)**

keycon.org. (E-mail) info@keycon.org. Con will be held in: Winnipeg MB (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Radisson. Guests will include: Richard Herd. L.A. Williams, Kevin J. Anderson, Rebecca Moesta.

18—20—**Mobicon. mobicon.org.** Mobile AL. General SF and fantasy con. Further details to be announced.

24—28—**International Space Development Conference. isdc.nss.org.** Dallas TX. Co-sponsored by Nat'l Space Society.

24—28—**Star Wars Celebration. starwars.com.** Convention Center, Los Angeles CA. Lucasfilm-sanctioned official event.

25—27—**MarCon. marcon.org.** Hyatt, Columbus OH. K. DeCandido, L. Reynolds, T. Zahn, N. Janda, P. & S. Pettinger.

25—27—**Oasis. oasfis.org.** Orlando FL. Joe Haldeman, Resnick, M. Bishop, K. A. Goonan, Niven, J. McDevitt, R. Sawyer.

25—27—**ConDuit. (801) 776-0164. conduit.sfcon.org.** Sheraton, Salt Lake UT. David Weber, Bob Eggleton, Dr. S.D. Howe.

25—27—**Anime North.animenorth.com.** Doubletree & Congress Centre, Toronto ON. Guests TBA. J-pop dance, brunch.

25—27—**Animazement. (919) 941-5050. animazement.org.** Sheraton, Durham NC. Anime.

25—28—**BaltiCon. (410) 563-3727. balticon.org.** Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Major East Coast SF/fantasy con.

25—28—**BayCon. baycon.org.** Marriot, San Mateo CA. Major West Coast science fiction and fantasy convention.

25—28—**ConQuest. kcsciencefiction.org.** Airport Hilton, Kansas City MO. P. Eisenstein, T. Harvia, T. Nielsen-Hayden.

25—28—**MisCon. (406) 544-7083. miscon.org.** Ruby's Inn, Missoula MT. Science fiction and fantasy convention.

25—28—**Media*WestCon. mediawestcon.org. mediawestcon@aol.com.** Holiday Inn So., Lansing MI. No official guests.

25—28—**WisCon. sf3.org/wiscon.** Concourse Hotel, Madison MI. Feminist SF/Fantasy. K. Link, L. Marks.

* * * *

JUNE 2007

1—3—**ConCarolinas, Box 9100, Charlotte NC 28299. concarolinas.org. concarolinas@concarolinas.org.** SF & fantasy.

1—3—**A-Kon, Box 852244, Richardson TX 75085. a-kon.com. info@a-kon.com.** Anime and gaming con.

1—4—**NZ Nat'l. Con, Box 16150, Wellington South, NZ. conspiracy2.sf.org.nz. info@conspiracy2.org.** Mercure Hotel.

8—10—**SoonerCon. soonercon.com.** Oklahoma City OK. Science fiction, fantasy, and gaming convention.

8—11—**Australia Nat'l. Con, Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. matcon.org.au.** Rydges. M. Mahy, I. Carmody.

21—24—**MidWestCon, 5627 Antoninus Dr., Cincinnati OH 45238. (513) 922-3234. cfg.org.** Doubletree, Sharon OH.

22—24—**ApolloCon, Box 541822, Houston TX 77254. apollocon.org.** Guests TBA. General-interest SF, fantasy & horror.

22—24—**ConTerpoint, 5911 Veranda Dr., Springfield VA 22152. conterpoint.org.** Rockville MD. SF/fantasy folksinging.

22—25—**Gathering of the Gargoyles. gatheringofthegargoyles.com.** Pigeon Forge TN. "A little bit of country..."

* * * *

AUGUST 2007

2—5—**TuckerCon (formerly Archon), Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstl.org.** Collinsville IL. NASFiC. \$120.

30—Sep. 3—**Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org.** Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$220.

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AUGUST 2008

6—10—**Denvention 3, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201.** Denver CO. WorldCon. \$130+.

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NEXT ISSUE

AUGUST ISSUE

Gonzo king **Rudy Rucker** and Hugo-winner **Bruce Sterling** join their considerable talents next issue to bring us a big, outrageous, fast-moving and freewheeling novella as our lead story for August, as a pair of out-of-work Special Effects Artists set out on a daring and dazzling journey down the mysterious "Hormiga Canyon," home to some Very Big (and Very Strange) Ants—a trip that will compel them to voyage to the end of time

and unearth and master the very secrets of the universe itself! This is a fabulous, over-the-top romp, deliciously audacious, and a lot of fun, so don't miss it!

ALSO IN AUGUST

Veteran writer **Tom Purdom** takes us adventuring on the high seas in dangerous sail-and-broadside days when the British Navy was slugging it out with slave traders, and tells the compelling and morally complex story of what you can find when you dare to part “The Mists of Time”; new writer **Daryl Gregory** warns us that sometimes intense concentration may be *too much* of a good thing, in a compassionate visit to “Dead Horse Point”; new writer **Justin Stanchfield**, making his *Asimov's* debut, paints a fascinating picture of high-tech exiles of the future, and what happens when, against the rules, a “Prodigal” returns; **Kathleen Ann Goonan**, returning after too long an absence, dares to venture across “The Bridge” between a doomed past and an enigmatic future; frequent contributor **Jack Skillingstead** shows us the plight of a woman unfortunate enough to get everything she's ever wished for, in “Thank You, Mr. Whiskers”; and new writer **Tim McDaniel**, making his *Asimov's* debut, treats us to a wry look at what goes on in a “Teacher's Lounge,” and how it just might save the world!

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's “Reflections” column takes a crack at “Decoding Cuneiform”; **Peter Heck** brings us “On Books”; and **James Patrick Kelly's** “On the Net” column explores the “Happy Red Planet”; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our August issue on sale at your newsstand on June 26, 2007. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—either by mail, or online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, (www.asimovs.com)—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up for you!

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